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TALKING BACK TO GOD:

An Examination of *Ḥutzpa K'lapei Shamaya* in the Babylonian Talmud

by Rachel S. Mikva

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for Ordination

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DIGEST

This thesis explores the phenomenon of *hutspa k'lapei shamaya* (impertinence against Heaven) in the *aggadah* of the Babylonian Talmud. Often, such boldness takes the form of a direct argument with God, challenging the Divine will. The discussion also takes into consideration, however, Talmudic passages that challenge God by casting doubt upon traditionally accepted Attributes, such as Divine omnipotence. The primary concern is to examine the significant theological ramifications of this confrontational posture in the Divine-human encounter.

Biblical precedent for *hutspa k'lapei shamaya* establishes many of the figures, motifs and forms which are found in the Talmud. Also, it sets up the dynamic by which humanity (especially Israel) can cry out for rectification when confronted with a reality at sharp variance with their faith. The Biblical heroes demand to argue their case, to know "how long" until God fulfills Divine promises, to understand "for what cause" is the suffering.

The place of such statements within Jewish theology is complex. The sacred literature conveys deep reverence for the omniscient and omnipotent God. Submission to Divine authority is assumed. Yet the attempt to reconcile the God of justice and history with undeserved or disproportionate suffering must at least raise the possibility that God is not the God of justice or not the

God of history -- even if this awful idea is immediately put aside.

The words hurled against Heaven continue to revolve around two major foci, which form the broad categories for the Talmudic material collected here: challenges of God's justice (Chapter II) and God's power (Chapter III). Analysis includes discussion of the "responses" within the text, such as Rabbinic justifications, condemnations, and God's perceived reaction.

Chapter Four takes up the vital question of how to read these *aggadic* texts, as homily or history. Seeking to establish some context for the passages, the next two chapters discuss historical, literary, theological and other considerations. The language of *aggadah* and the concept of covenant emerge as the fundamental building blocks which allow the Sages to express their devotion to God and in a wide variety of ways, even rebellious ones.

Hutzpa k'lapei shamaya remains a viable posture in relating to God throughout Jewish religious history. Subsequent ages absorb and adapt the forms and themes of earlier literature, highlighting the dynamic power of the motifs and indicating how the Talmudic material has been integrated into the Jewish psyche (Chapter VII). While these other periods and literatures expose the enduring need to express the deafening dissonance which often occurs when faith meets reality, the complaint against Heaven paradoxically remains, for the most part, an affirmation of Heaven.

DEDICATION

To my parents, who taught me the value of
praise and protest, and to
Mark and Jacob,
with whom I get to practice all the time.

Their love nourishes my soul.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

I. Subject and Methodology

> Resh Lakish said: It is related of a certain woman named Tzafenat b. Peniel...that her captor abused her a whole night. In the morning he put seven wraps around her and took her out to sell her. A certain man who was exceptionally ugly came and said, "Show me her beauty." "Fool," the other responded, "if you want to buy her, buy -- for there is no other so beautiful in all the world."
>
> "Nonetheless, [show her to me]." He took six wraps off her, and she herself tore off the seventh and rolled in the dust, crying, "Master of the Universe, if You have no pity on us, why have You no pity on the sanctity of Your mighty name?" For her Jeremiah utters lamentation, saying, "O daughter of My people, gird yourself with sackcloth and wallow in ashes; mourn as for an only child, wail bitterly, for the spoiler shall suddenly come upon us" (Jer. 6:26).
>
> It does not say "upon you" but "upon us." The spoiler is come, if one may say so, upon Me and upon you. [1]

In shame and agony, Tzafenat cries out to God. Her cry does not have the tone of a petition, however, as much as an accusation. Why has God not stretched forth the Divine arm of salvation to rescue her -- or at least to salvage God's own reputation? Could such suffering truly be justified? The Rabbis of the Talmud, in contemplating her plight, suggest that she is not alone in her lament. God, too, if one could possibly say so, stands there naked and ashamed.

This moving passage, rich in Divine pathos and powerful in its imagery, seems a bit shocking for its theological ramifications. Tzafenat clings to, yet also

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[1] *Gittin* 58a.

stands against, God. The telling of her story challenges two of the basic presuppositions about the nature of the theistic God: God is just, and God is omnipotent. If the "Master of the Universe" does not act against undue suffering, how can God still represent absolute justice? Defending God against this charge, the *aggadah* puts forth the possibility that, perhaps, there is nothing God can do. The enemy is come upon them both. Yet an all-powerful Deity cannot be despoiled by some human villain.

The place of such statements within Jewish theology is complex. Judaism's sacred literature conveys deep reverence for the omniscient and omnipotent God whose Divine providence serves to infuse the world with blessing and justice. Nevertheless, even the Biblical paradigms of piety occasionally challenge their Creator -- Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah, Job. In so doing, they rebel against the principle of devoutly accepting the Divine will without complaint, and they seem to question some of the fundamental theological assumptions about God and the world.

This phenomenon, broadly defined, is termed *hutspa k'lapei shamaya* -- impertinence or boldness with regard to Heaven. Such *hutspa* may take the form of a direct protest to God, taking God to task for failing to meet some expectation or fulfill a Divine promise. This mode seems prominent in the first half of the *aggadah* cited

above. On the other hand, God can be challenged in the world of ideas and images, simply by casting doubt upon the Divine attributes. "The spoiler is come upon Me and upon you." The thesis will focus on *hutspa k'lapei shamaya* as it appears in the Babylonian Talmud. While one can find many instances throughout Rabbinic literature, their inclusion in the Talmud is especially intriguing. After all, the legal sections of the Talmud remain a key source of authority for traditional Judaism, and its entire canon (containing many *aggadot* of all kinds) is thought to have been transmitted by God to Moses on Mt. Sinai: the Oral Torah.

It is important to distinguish the theme of this thesis from other, related concepts. Several kinds of actions are considered *hatsif* (bold) in the Talmud, including praying in an open valley, or openly recounting sins as if unashamed.[2] While the reasoning behind these judgments may be interesting, they do not represent the direct impertinence with regard to Heaven which is the main concern of this work.

A more subtle distinction must be drawn between general anthropomorphism and anthropopathism, which present difficulties for certain philosophical God concepts (especially those that depend on Greek philosophy), and those passages that challenge

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[2] *Berakhot* 34b.

fundamental aspects of theism: Divine power, knowledge, justice and benevolence. To suggest that God has an arm is not the same as suggesting that this arm cannot effect redemption, even if one chooses to understand both ideas metaphorically.

Lastly, every instance in which one questions Divine authority or justice does not illustrate the theme. The Talmud is full of real and mythical villains who express disbelief in God, or even seek to usurp the Divine throne. *Hutzpa* is not hubris. It is not the tragic flaw of the powerful who arrogate unto themselves Divine rights and powers. Rather, this thesis deals with those who hurl their words against Heaven from within the boundaries of faith, who defy but do not deny. This voice of rebellion is an authentic Jewish posture in the relationship to God; indeed, its expression is canonized.[3]

The most obvious question, then, becomes: what is this material doing within the sacred literature of Judaism? What does it communicate about the Talmudic conception of God, and humanity's relationship with the Deity? Extracting this information from the text is not simple. The Talmud is not a systematic theological work; it seeks to define a way of life based on God's

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[3] Harold M. Schulweis, "Suffering and Evil," Great Jewish Ideas, Abraham Millgram, ed. (Clinton, MA, 1964), 200.

revelation to Israel. While it may be possible to derive the values implicit in a body of law,[4] *hutspa k'lapei shamaya* is not generally found in the context of *halakha*; it is buried within the rich storehouse of *aggadah*. The language of legend complicates exposition of a text. Poetic license, the presence of material not intended as theological doctrine, the inconsistencies, all contribute to the conundrum.

Various tests, such as a comparison to liturgy, have been suggested to determine on an objective basis the real theological value of specific Talmudic sayings. Theoretically, this test could help distinguish those elements that become part of the consciousness of "Catholic Israel."[5] Although echoes of *hutspa k'lapei shamaya* can be heard within the liturgy,[6] this methodology was not deemed most appropriate to the topic. The whole point, after all, is to explore those reaches of theology that seem to be in flagrant contradiction to

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[4] Jacob Neusner makes a fairly convincing case that this is the most responsible method of determining the theology of the Rabbis. He begins with authoritative legal texts, and works back toward their underlying assumptions. See, *e.g.*, Judaism --The Evidence of the Mishnah (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981).

[5] Solomon Schechter, Some Aspects of Rabbinic Theology (London, 1909), 9-10.

[6] See Chapter Seven in this thesis, and in Anson Laytner, "*Hutspa K'lapei Shamaya*," (Rabbinic thesis, HUC-JIR, 1979). Cf. Jakob Petuchowski, Theology and Poetry: Studies in the Medieval Piyyut (Boston, 1978).

established doctrine. Ultimately, the fragments speak most clearly when heard as aspects of a theological structure of checks and balances. It is vital to keep in mind that, no matter how prevalent the confrontations with God may be in the Talmud, they are ensconced in a literature which repeatedly affirms Divine omnipotence, omniscience and benevolence.

For these reasons, the focus is on a single document. With this limitation, it is possible to cut through some of the critical dilemmas simply, by offering a more comprehensive picture of the ideas at issue. Boldness against Heaven can be related to the environment in which its expression flourished, relating "substance to setting, text to context, the ideas people held to the world they sought to imagine and create, at least in mind."[7] This can be done, hopefully, without explaining away the ideas which comprise our central concern. Ultimately, the precise intent of a passage or the effort to root it in historical context must, at times, give way to the poetic imagination.

Aggadah clearly is intended as a vehicle for communicating theology; Biblical narrative serves as equally striking evidence for this contention. Jakob Petuchowski even suggests it would "not be too farfetched

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[7] Jacob Neusner, Major Trends in Formative Judaism, Second Series: Texts, Contents, and Contexts (Chico, CA, 1984), 50.

to render the word *Aggada[h]* as 'narrative theology.'"[8] Given careful analysis, and with an awareness of possible pitfalls, then, it should be possible to say something about God and humanity as expressed in the Talmudic passages at issue. It will not be the theology of the Rabbis, as the prevailing wisdom is that such a systematic doctrine does not consist in the Talmud.

> With God as a reality, Revelation as a fact, the Torah as a rule of life, and the hope of Redemption as a most vivid expectation, they felt no need for formulating their dogmas into a creed, which, as was once remarked by a great theologian, is repeated not because we believe, but that we may believe. What they had of theology, they enunciated spasmodically or "by impulses."[9]

Still, without solving all of the critical questions, one can explore the Talmudic record, and venture to articulate aspects of the Rabbinic experience of God. Although the unanswered questions are important, the goal is not to examine theological doctrine, but theological possibilities. Given the richness of the literature, the spiritual and intellectual rewards of such an exploration are enduring.

II. Outline

Because the Rabbis considered the Talmud, in many

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[8] Jakob Petuchowski, Our Masters Taught (New York, 1982), xvi.

[9] Schechter, Some Aspects of Rabbinic Theology (London, 1909), 12. See also: Max Kadushin, The Rabbinic Mind (New York, 1952).

ways, an exposition of the Divine will as communicated in the Bible, it is important to begin with the Biblical precedent for *ḥutzpa k'lapei shamaya*. Aside from establishing many of the figures, motifs and forms, the Bible sets up the dynamic by which humanity (especially Israel) can cry out for rectification when confronted with a reality at sharp variance with their faith. The Biblical heroes demand to argue their case, to know "how long" until God fulfills Divine promises, to understand "for what cause" is the suffering. They point to injustice, and expect the True Judge to vindicate the righteous.

These conflicts endure. As the language for addressing them develops, so do the themes. Yet the words hurled against Heaven continue to revolve around two major foci: God's justice and God's power. The attempt to reconcile the God of justice and history with undeserved or disproportionate suffering must at least raise the possibility that God is not the God of justice or not the God of history -- even if this awful idea is immediately put aside. As the Rabbis seek to define the path of life in accordance with **their** understanding of the Divine will, other issues of authority also arise. Consequently, the Talmudic material is categorized according to the broad classifications: challenges of God's justice (Chapter II) and God's power (Chapter III).

While they incorporate related ideas, such as mercy and omniscience, and occasionally blend into each other, these headings serve as adequate markers in organizing the passages. The texts are presented in the original and in translation, with some notes about how they fit into the conceptual framework of challenging God. Analysis includes discussion of the "responses" within the text, such as Rabbinic justifications, condemnations, and God's perceived reaction.

Chapter Four will take up the vital question of how to read these texts. The fact that they are in *aggadic* form does not vitiate their truth, but are they to be read as homily or history? In deliberating on this choice, it becomes essential to analyze some of the issues and assumptions about God and the world which are imbedded in the *aggadot*, and may even be their driving force.

The next two chapters then seek to establish some context for the passages; historical, literary, theological and other considerations are discussed.

Whatever the context, however, the phenomenon of *hutzpa k'lapei shamaya* remains a viable Jewish posture in relating to God throughout Jewish religious history. While it is not within the scope of this thesis to undertake a comprehensive survey of the historical development of confronting God, a look at how subsequent

ages grappled with these ideas is instructive in several ways. First, they highlight the dynamic power of the motifs developed in the Talmud. Absorbing and adapting the forms and themes of earlier literature, the later expressions are suffused with Jewish tradition. Also, they indicate how the Talmudic material has been understood and integrated into the Jewish psyche. This information, in turn, may help to interpret the theological, psychological and spiritual intent of the original passages. In representing other periods and literatures that invite such impertinence directed against God, the texts expose the enduring need to express the deafening dissonance which often occurs when faith meets reality.

III. Biblical Precedent

Psalm 44

10 Yet You have rejected and disgraced us; You do not go with our armies.
11 You make us retreat before our foe; our enemies plunder us at will.
12 You let them devour us like sheep; You disperse us among the nations....
18 All this has come upon us, yet we have not forgotten You, or been false to Your covenant.
19 Our hearts have not gone astray, nor have our feet swerved from Your path,
20 though You cast us, crushed, to where the sea monster is, and covered us over with deepest darkness....
23 It is for Your sake that we are slain all day long, that we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.
24 Rouse Yourself; why do You sleep, O Lord? Awaken, do not reject us forever!
25 Why do You hide Your face, ignoring our affliction

and distress?
26 We lie prostrate in the dust; our body clings to the ground.
27 Arise and help us, redeem us, as befits Your faithfulness.

If Tzafenat (see above, p. 1) had had the leisure to compose a poetic lament, one could almost hear her utter these words. She and the psalmist lay prostrate, miserable in the dust. The psalm makes her arguments much more explicit, yet it grows out of the same pressing question we all have to ask: Why do we suffer? So great is the need to know, so urgent the need for relief, the question often emerges as a challenge to God.

> They brought their pleas to God because they fervently believed that he is good and just, that he cared for them and intended to help them. And it was because they believed this so strongly that they became so disturbed and their language became so violent when to all appearances God did not hear or answer.[10]

Ranging "from tortured complaint in the face of suffering to outrageous anger in the absence of justice,"[11] the psalms of lament use many arguments as they cry out. Even hymns praising God's saving power are not always totally innocent, but also serve as a reproach, demanding immediate action. For instance, the psalm cited above begins by mentioning the miraculous

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[10] Donald E. Gowan, The Triumph of Faith in Habakkuk (Atlanta, 1976), 23-4.

[11] Belden C. Lane, "*Hutspa K'lapei Shamaya*: A Christian Response to the Jewish Tradition of Arguing with God," Journal of Ecumenical Studies 23:4 (1986): 569.

deeds that God did for "our fathers": planting them in the Promised Land and granting them victory over their enemies. Equally certain that God is now the cause of their defeat and disgrace, the psalmist goes on to declare the innocence of the people. They have not been false to the covenant; in fact, they are slaughtered for God's sake, for their faithfulness. The demand for Divine action accuses God of sleeping on the job, as if unaware or unconcerned about the tragic events. Finally, the poet rests on the principle that God's own attribute of faithfulness demands that God arise and help the afflicted people.

Similar arguments are employed by several specific characters in the Bible, including prophets, whose usual mission is to communicate God's charges against the people, and importune them to change their ways. The last chapters of Isaiah, seeking to offer comfort after the predicted catastrophe has come to pass, also add bold protests of their own. Several translators and commentators hear the prophet's voice proclaim the following:[12]

62:1 For the sake of Zion I will not be silent,
For the sake of Jerusalem I will not be still...
6 Upon your walls, O Jerusalem, I have set watchmen,
who shall never be silent by day or by night. O

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[12] Sheldon Blank, "Men Against God: The Promethean Element in Biblical Prayer," Prophetic Thought: Essays and Addresses (Cincinnati, 1977), 98ff. See also the Soncino commentary by Israel Slotki.

you, the Lord's remembrancers, take no rest
7 And give no rest to Him until He establish Jerusalem and make her renowned on earth.

Israel will not be silent until God fulfills the promised redemption of Israel. After all, Isaiah argues, God is the true Parent and Redeemer of Israel (63:16). Even if all others can abdicate responsibility for the fate of the people, God cannot. In fact, Isaiah accuses God of causing the people to sin, and demands to know the reason: "Why, Lord, do You make us stray from Your ways, and turn our hearts away from revering You?" (63:17). He expresses incredulity that God would not intervene in the face of such tremendous suffering: "At such things will You restrain yourself, O Lord; will You stand idly by and let us suffer so heavily?" (64:11).

Similarly, Habakkuk cannot accept that God ignores travesties of justice:

1:2 How long, O Lord, shall I cry out and You not listen, shall I shout to You, "Violence!" and You not save?...
13 You whose eyes are too pure to look upon evil, Who cannot countenance wrongdoing -- why do You countenance treachery, and stand by idle while the one in the wrong devours the one in the right?

Also like Isaiah, he feels a compelling duty toward the truth, and climbs to the watchtower to await an answer from God (2:1). From this perch they stretch their intellect searching for understanding, and stretch their faith waiting for God to fulfill the Divine promise in a world which seems devoid of justice and blessing.

What is most intriguing about these faithful servants is that they often merit some sort of answer from the Deity to their complaint. Habakkuk is told that justice and righteousness will ultimately prevail. Not all of the answers are so reassuring. The classic Biblical example of protest against God is Job. While he is often portrayed as a model of patience, proving righteousness and faithfulness precisely when justice seems nowhere evident, he repeatedly cries out against the injustice and demands his day in court. While he does not curse God and die, as his wife suggests, neither can he forgo his own truth. In clinging to his own innocence as he debates with his "friends," he challenges God. God's answer, however, indicates only that Job's power and understanding are insufficient to appreciate the workings of the world; God is Master of the Universe. Job is reduced to silence. Still, God vindicates Job's perplexed outcry in the face of the inscrutability of evil, in contradistinction to the glib theodicies of his friends. And, in the end, Job's fortunes are restored.

Job's arguments are worth examining in greater detail:

9:17 He crushes me with a storm; He wounds me much for no cause.
18 He does not let me catch my breath, but sates me with bitterness.
19 If a trial of strength -- He is the strong one;
If a trial in court -- who will summon Him for me?
20 Though I were innocent, my mouth would condemn me;
Though I were blameless, He would prove me crooked.

21 I am blameless -- I am distraught; I am sick of life.
22 It is all one; therefore I say He destroys the blameless and the guilty.
23 When suddenly a scourge brings death, He mocks as the innocent fail.
24 The earth is handed over to the wicked one; He covers the eyes of its judges. If it is not He, then who?

Testifying to his own innocence, Job accuses God of wounding for no cause, of effectively mocking righteousness since it brings no salvation. He also complains that the deck is unfairly stacked against him, for the Almighty will prevail in any event. This is a powerful indictment of Divine justice.

Aware of his own powerlessness, Job at first hopes for nature somehow to intercede for him. Heaven and earth must surely represent the Divine order as it is meant to be:

16:
18 Earth, do not cover my blood; let there be no resting place for my outcry!
19 Surely now my witness is in heaven; he who can testify for me is on high....
21 Let Him arbitrate between a man and God as between a man and his fellow.

Although Job knows that he cannot prevail, it is important to notice the striking stance he takes. It is as if he brings the Master of the Universe to court, reversing the roles that one expects in a case before the Divine Judge. God becomes the defendant as well.[13] In

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[13] Compare Micah 6:3: "My people! What wrong have I done you? What hardship have I caused you? Testify against Me." It is an indictment of Israel and an

the end, Job pleads his case directly before God, and recants only after "seeing" the Deity with his own eyes. It is no wonder that the last of the prophets proclaims that God is weary of people asking, "Where is the God of justice?" (Mal. 2:17). Yet the question endures, and God continues to respond.

Jeremiah, too, brings God to court, attributing to God fault in administering the universe:

12:1 You will win, O Lord, if I make claim against You,
Yet I shall present charges against You:
Why does the way of the wicked prosper?
Why are the workers of treachery at ease?
2 You have planted them, and they have taken root,
They spread, they even bear fruit....

God's answer (vv. 5-6) is essentially a warning that things will get worse, and Jeremiah needs to be stronger. Although this response is not very satisfying, there are implications to the dialogue beyond God's words. Jeremiah is not chastised for so boldly challenging God. After Jeremiah pleads for mercy on behalf of Israel, God responds, "Even if Moses and Samuel were to intercede with Me, I would not be won over to that people" (15:1). Again, Jeremiah's prayer seems ineffective, yet there is a hint that the prayers of certain righteous individuals generally are persuasive. Sheldon Blank suggests that the several occasions on which God tells Jeremiah not to pray for the people may be due to the fact that it is

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assurance of God's innocence, yet God invites testimony against the Divine throne.

difficult for God to ignore his pleas.[14]

According to the Talmud, *hutzpa* may be a vital part of their effectiveness. In discussing the case of Balaam, the Rabbis note that he is initially denied permission to go with the messengers. Balaam persists in asking and God relents, which leads to the Talmudic conclusions: "*Hutzpa*, even against Heaven is effective," and "*hutzpa* is sovereignty without a crown."[15]

Those most effective in their bold challenges to God are, arguably, Moses and Abraham. While others may achieve existential satisfaction in the fact that God comes to talk, making it possible to live and believe despite the lack of answers, these two Biblical heroes seem to get tangible results. Their arguments for justice at times prevail over God's announced intentions. In Genesis 18, Abraham challenges God's decision to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah:

23 Abraham came forward and said, "Will You sweep away
24 the innocent along with the guilty? What if there should be fifty innocent within the city; will You then wipe out the place and not forgive it for the
25 sake of the innocent fifty who are in it? Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of the whole earth deal justly?"
26 And the Lord answered, "If I find within the city of Sodom fifty innocent ones, I will forgive the whole place for their sake."

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[14] Blank, "Men Against God," 93. The Biblical verses include Jer. 7:16, 11:14, 14:11.

[15] *Sanhedrin* 105a.

It is the same complaint offered up by Job and Jeremiah, yet Abraham succeeds in gaining a conditional reprieve for the sinful city. The Divine Judge must deal justly; innocence must have its reward. Through a series of humble, yet persistent pleas, Abraham strikes a deal: God will spare the entire city if ten righteous people can be found therein.

Ultimately, those ten are not to be found. Yet Abraham becomes an enduring model of piety and passion for his argument. In fact, his approach becomes a paradigm for the "law-court" pattern of prayer. Humbly addressing God, the petitioners go on to justify their case and boldly demand action. There is an acute awareness of the paradoxical nature of *hutspa k'lapei shamaya*: humanity, who is but dust and ashes, is challenging the Master of the Universe.[16]

It is Moses, however, who is seen as the greatest advocate for Israel.

> It is not surprising that he occupies a special place in Jewish tradition. His passion for social justice, his struggle for national liberation, his triumphs and disappointments, his poetic inspiration, his gifts as a strategist and his organizational genius, his complex relationship with

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[16] For a detailed discussion of the law-court form and of issues related to this thesis, see: Anson Laytner, "*Hutspa K'lapei Shamaya*;" Joseph Heinemann, "Law-Court Patterns in Prayer," Prayer in the Talmud, (New York, 1977); B. Gemser, "The *Rîb-* or Controversy Pattern in Hebrew Mentality," in M. Noth and D. Winton Thomas, eds., Supplements to Vestum Testamentum III: Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East, (Leiden, 1955), 120ff.

> God and His people, his requirements and promises, his condemnations and blessings, his bursts of anger, his silences, his efforts to reconcile the law with compassion, authority with integrity -- no individual, ever, anywhere, accomplished so much for so many people in so many different domains.[17]

One significant role is as intercessor for the people with God. There may be no example more striking than his bold challenge after the people sin in worshipping the golden calf.

Exodus 32:
9 The Lord further said to Moses, "I see that
10 this is a stiffnecked people. Now, let Me be, that
My anger may blaze forth against them and that I may
11 destroy them, and make of you a great nation." But
Moses implored the Lord his God, saying, "Let not
Your anger, O Lord, blaze forth against Your people,
whom You delivered from the land of Egypt with great
12 power and with a mighty hand. Let not the Egyptians
say, `It was with evil intent that He delivered
them, only to kill them off in the mountains and
annihilate them from the face of the earth.´ Turn
from Your blazing anger, and renounce the plan to
punish Your people.
13 "Remember Your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and
Israel, how You swore to them by Your Self and said
to them: I will make your offspring as numerous as
the stars of heaven, and I will give to your
offspring this whole land of which I spoke, to
14 possess forever." And the Lord renounced the
punishment He had planned to bring upon His people.

Calling upon God´s past acts and promises,[18] and raising the specter of the Divine reputation being ruined, Moses forestalls the people´s annihilation. The next day, he

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[17] Elie Wiesel, Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends, Marion Wiesel, trans. (New York, 1976), 182.

[18] The remembrance of the patriarchs is later interpreted to include the notion of *z´khut avot* -- vicarious merit on account of the righteousness of Israel´s ancestors and their relationship to God.

seeks to confirm the pardon by placing his own life on the line: forgive them, or wipe me out too (v. 32). Depending on his own reputation and relationship with God, Moses issues this bold ultimatum. While complete pardon is withheld, God promises precise justice. Only those who actually sinned and had not yet been killed by the sword would be struck by the plague.

In Numbers 14, Moses expands upon the innovative argument that the peoples of the world will judge God according to the fate of Israel. The people despair of entering the Promised Land upon hearing the report of the spies sent ahead to scout out the area. Outraged at their faithlessness, God threatens to strike them with disease, to disown them, and start over with Moses. Earlier, Moses indicates such punishment would destroy God's reputation for goodness; here, he suggests faith in Divine **omnipotence** also rests on the people's safe deliverance from the wilderness. This notion that the fate of God and Israel are bound to each other endures and develops through the centuries, as do the ideas contained in the rest of Moses' argument:

Exodus 32:
17 "Therefore, I pray, let my Lord's forbearance be
18 great, as You have declared, saying, `The Lord! slow to anger and abounding in kindness; forgiving iniquity and transgression; yet not remitting all punishment, but visiting the iniquity of fathers upon children, upon the third and fourth
19 generations.' Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to Your great kindness, as You have

forgiven this people ever since Egypt."
20 And the Lord said, "I pardon, as you have asked."

God's own description of the Divine attributes give basis to the human demands for justice and mercy. God is bound to the Divine word.

It has been debated whether such narratives intend to show that these arguments actually change God's mind, or merely serve as didactic devices, designed to spread the truth that God cannot be unjust. Do human beings actually coerce God into acting justly, or is God's justice assumed, serving as a point of departure for the text?[19] It may be that Abraham sets out to reverse the Divine decree. "Shall not the Judge of the whole earth deal justly?" (Gen. 18:25), he boldly challenges, compelling God to concede the injustice of the intended punishment. Abraham shrewdly bargains down to the number ten. The other interpretation points out that God investigates Sodom and Gomorrah, and knows full well there are not ten righteous people there. Furthermore, the only (partially) righteous people living there are Lot and his family, who do not perish with the wicked. This interpretation maintains that God informs Abraham of the judgement because he will serve as a witness and

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[19] Anson Laytner lists Eric Fromm and Sheldon Blank as proponents of the former interpretation, and Chanan Brichto and Nahum Sarna of the latter. "*Hutspa K'lapei Shamaya*," 16-18.

teacher of God's faithfulness and justice. "For I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children...to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right" (Gen. 18:19). This could be an invitation to debate. Abraham's questions, then, confirm the truth of God's ways, and show how merciful God can be, willing to spare an entire city for the sake of ten righteous human beings.

The question of intent remains a crucial one. Anson Laytner makes an intriguing suggestion in his analysis of the "law-court" pattern of prayer in Biblical and Rabbinic literature: its purpose is both historical and homiletical. The drama of the historical encounter indicates God may, indeed, embark on an unjust action, and need intervention or direction. Thus, to Abraham, to Jeremiah and Job, to the pious Sages and others who dare cajole and bargain, challenge and defy -- to them their arguments are vital components of the workings of Divine justice and mercy. The other interpretation offers the "`true facts' of the story, its theology, by placing the dialogue within a wider context (i.e., the perspective of the author(s) or God)."[20]

Does this dual approach work for the multitude of Rabbinic *aggadot* which envision Biblical heroes and paradigmatic figures arguing their case before God? The

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[20] ibid., 18.

Talmudic sages speak in

> parabolic language, not meant to explore in scholastic fashion the recesses of the mind of God. It involves a high degree of playfulness and polyvalence. Bound neither by linguistic nor metaphysical precision the rabbis feel free to put words into the mouths of the patriarchs, twisting a multiplicity of exegeses out of the original text.... Theirs is a knowledge of God made open through the twists of dialogue and repartee, acquiescence and argument.[21]

Yet Judaism has always endowed Talmudic texts with dramatic integrity and, thus, the possibility that such words were spoken, or ones like them, must be real. The Biblical verses brought to prove their points, then, are not simply formalized pretexts; they are saying there is a subtext of dialogue, echoing in between the lines of Scripture and in between the moments of recorded history, which also give expression to God's relationship with humanity and the universe. The subtlety of such an approach stems from the Rabbinic understanding of their exegetical task. They seek both to elaborate on and clarify the Biblical text itself, as well as decipher its encoded instructions guiding religious thought and practice. Embedded deep within the Rabbinic psyche and suffusing the Talmudic text, Scripture serves as a bridge between the generations.

The issue of how the Rabbis use Scripture relates to

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[21] Belden C. Lane, "*Hutspa K'lapei Shamaya*: A Christian Response to the Jewish Tradition of Arguing with God," 577-8.

the more direct question of whether to read Biblical narratives and Rabbinic *aggadot* literally or metaphorically. When a tale is presented which raises doubts about God's justice, knowledge or power, is it an accurate -- if only partial -- expression of feeling or events? Is it intended to convey what it says, or something else?

For now, let the answer be "both." The Talmudic passages will be presented assuming their historical validity and/or ideational seriousness. Later chapters will discuss many of the factors that should be taken into consideration, such as humor, politics, and polemics. But first, these legends will speak for themselves. Legends are, perhaps, the highest expression of truth, more genuine that the truth of history. For while the latter must be demonstrated and proved, must be studied and may be forgotten, legend lives deep in our consciousness, eternally alive.[22]

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[22] Immanuel Olsvanger, Contentions with God (Cape Town, 1921), 2.

CHAPTER TWO

CHALLENGES TO DIVINE JUSTICE

With Scriptural precedent for *hutzpa k'lapei shamaya*, the Rabbis develop many of their own traditions and tales which question God's justice. Deriving from Biblical exegesis and the lives of the Sages themselves, such *aggadot* are recorded within Judaism's "other Torah": the Talmud.

Just as the words of Abraham, Jeremiah and Job acquire their greatest significance within the context of God's response, so, too, the Talmudic challenges become most meaningful when they are heard, and there is a response. This context is essential to understanding the theological intent of the text. Within the Talmud, challenges to God's justice are not always heard in the same way. The multiple levels of dialogue offer numerous opportunities for response. An *aggadah* may give God's answer, solicit information from Elijah, or offer the reaction of angels and Rabbis. Later Sages may add their own commentary.

The fascinating aspect of the various traditions is that, while many challenges are refuted or negated by their context, it is not always the case.

I. God's Action Defended as Just

אמר רבא *מאי דכתיב °ישמש ירח עמד וזבולה
לאור חציך יהלכו מלמד שעלו שמש וירח לזבול אמרו לפניו רבש"ע אם אתה עושה דין לבן עמרם נצא ואם
לאו לא נצא עד שורק בהם חצים אמר להן *בכבודי לא מחיתם בכבוד בשר ודם מחיתם והאידנא לא נפקי
עד דמחו להו

> Raba said: What is the meaning of the verse, "The sun and the moon stood still in the heaven; at the light of Your arrows they are made to go" (Hab. 3:11)? This teaches that the sun and the moon ascended [from the firmament] to the heaven[1] and said, "Master of the Universe, if You will execute justice for Amram's son, we will go forth [to give light]; if not, we will not go forth. Thereupon God shot arrows at them saying, "For My honor you did not protest,[2] yet you protest for the honor of flesh and blood?" So now they do not go forth until they are driven to it.[3]

Like Moses, who put his life on the line (see above, p. 20), the sun and moon offer an ultimatum. Demanding that God vindicate Moses (Amram's son) in the face of Korah's rebellion, they threaten not to rise, thereby plunging God's entire world into permanent darkness. This could be considered blackmail. It is also, in one sense, an effort to connect the proper physical order of the universe to its moral order. Job sought the same balance (see above, p. 15). Yet God shames the blackmailers, indicting their limited vision of morality. They are concerned that Korah must pay for flouting God's will, in order to demonstrate there is justice in the world. When God points out that their going forth each day serves as the catalyst for widespread idolatry -- the ultimate denial of God's existence and rule -- they want

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[1] Proceeding from the notion that there are seven levels of heavens.

[2] Rashi: Every day, kings all over the world -- the moment they lay their crowns on their heads -- bow down to the sun.

[3] *Sanhedrin* 110a.

to cease shining altogether. Each day, it is God's arrows that send them forth.

This is one of many passages in which a challenge to Divine justice is deflected by demonstrating that God's seemingly unjust action is, in fact, right and true. To the sun and moon, the steady physical order of the universe, in the face of such ethical disarray -- idolatry, violence, injustice -- seems almost ludicrous. Korah's challenge to Moses' Divinely given authority cannot and does not go unpunished. Even before justice can be executed, they demand it. Yet God does punish Korah and his accomplices, and this decision seems unrelated to the sun and moon's threats. The *aggadah* serves instead as a foil, to vindicate God's justice. There is, indeed, a connection between the physical and ethical order of the universe, for it is the earth that is used to punish Korah and his followers, swallowing them alive. It is only God, however, who may interfere with the regular workings of the universe, in keeping with the Divine conception of justice. The sun and moon must continue to shine.

Troubled by the rise of Korah, the sun and moon essentially challenge the justice of a world in which the wicked seem to prosper. Related to this concern, the inevitable question regarding God's justice has always been: why do the righteous suffer?

א"ר אבא בר כהנא מאי דכתיב °חלילה לך מעשות כדבר
הזה להמית צדיק עם רשע אמר אברהם לפני הקב"ה רבש"ע *חולין הוא מעשות כדבר הזה להמית
צדיק עם רשע ולא והכתיב °והכרתי ממך צדיק ורשע בצדיק שאינו גמור אבל בצדיק גמור לא והכתיב
°וממקדשי תחלו *ותני רב יוסף אל תקרי ממקדשי אלא ממקודשי אלו בני אדם שקיימו את התורה
מאל"ף ועד ת"ו התם גמי כיון שהיה בידם למחות ולא מיחו הוו להו כצדיקים שאינן גמורים

> Said R. Aba b. Kahana: What is the meaning of the verse, "Far be it [*halila*] from You to do in such a manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked" (Gen. 18:25)? What Abraham said to the Holy One blessed be He is, "Master of the Universe, it would be a profanation[4] to act in this manner, slaying the righteous with the wicked." [But does not God do this?] Is it not written, "And I will cut off from you [both] the righteous and the wicked" (Ezek. 21:8)? That refers only to one who is not thoroughly righteous. Does it not apply as well to one who is completely righteous? Is it not written, "And begin [the slaughter] with My sanctuary" (Ezek. 9:6), about which Rabbi Joseph taught: Do not read "My sanctuary [*mikdashi*]," but rather "My sanctified ones [*m'kuddashai*]" -- namely, even those people who fulfilled the Torah from a to z.
>
> In this case, too, since it was in their power to protest [against the wickedness of the others] and they did not protest, they are not regarded as thoroughly righteous.[5]

The bold suggestion that God does punish without cause is negated; suffering that seems unfair is thereby justified. The righteous suffer because they do not meet their societal obligation, striving -- albeit in vain -- to keep others from the path of sin. In fact, in a parallel passage that elaborates on Rabbi Joseph's teaching, it is the Attribute of Justice that demands the punishment.

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[4] Connecting *halila* with *hullin* [profanation].

[5] *Avodah Zarah* 4a.

א"ל הקב"ה לגבריאל לך ורשום
על מצחן של צדיקים תיו של דיו שלא
ישלטו בהם מלאכי חבלה ועל מצחם של
רשעים תיו של דם כדי שישלטו בהן
מלאכי חבלה אמרה מדת הדין לפני הקב"ה
רבש"ע מה נשתנו אלו מאלו אמר לה הללו
צדיקים גמורים והללו רשעים גמורים אמרה
לפניו רבש"ע היה בידם למחות ולא מיחו
אמר לה גלוי וידוע לפני שאם מיחו בהם
לא יקבלו מהם (*אמר) לפניו רבש"ע אם
לפניך גלוי להם מי גלוי והיינו דכתיב °וקן
בחור ובתולה טף ונשים תהרגו למשחית ועל
כל איש אשר עליו התיו אל תגשו וממקדשי
תחלו ויכתיב ויחלו באנשים הזקנים אשר
לפני הבית *תני רב יוסף אל תקרי מקדשי
אלא מקודשי אלו בני אדם שקיימו את התורה כולה מאלף ועד תיו

The Holy One blessed be He said to Gabriel, "Go and set a mark of ink on the foreheads of the righteous so the angels of destruction will have no power over them, and a mark of blood on the foreheads of the wicked so the angels of destruction will have power over them." Said the Attribute of Justice before the Holy One blessed be He, "Master of the Universe, are they really so different?" God replied, "These people are absolutely righteous, and these people are absolutely wicked. Justice said, "The [former] had it in their power to protest, but they did not." God answered, "I knew for certain that had they protested against the [wicked], they would not have been heeded." "Master of the Universe, it was known to You, but was it known to them?"

Thus it is written, "Slay utterly the old man, the young and the maiden, the little child and women, but do not come near any one who has the mark on him. Begin at My sanctuary." And it is written, "Then they began with the elders that were before the house" (Ezek 9:6).

Rabbi Joseph taught: Do not read "My sanctuary," rather "My sanctified ones" -- namely, those people who fulfilled the Torah from a to z.[6]

Because Justice demands that the righteous protest and they did not, even the "sanctified ones" are doomed to

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[6] *Shabbat* 55a.

destruction. The verse from Ezekiel refers to the first exile; for the Rabbis, the seemingly mindless slaying of pious men, women and children speaks also of their own experience. Often, exegesis of Biblical material in the Talmud serves to comment on the Rabbis' world. The text becomes a paradigm. Community responsibility, as an explanation of suffering and an exhortation to righteousness, is a lesson for all time.[7]

Although the expulsion of the people generally was believed to be a just punishment for their sins, however defined, the possibility that there would be no end to the suffering in exile is terrifying, unthinkable. It would imply that God is no longer with Israel, and the covenant is abrogated. These fears are given voice in the Rabbinic imagination, as Biblical figures challenge God, and God explicitly defends Divine justice and faithfulness.

°ותאמר ציון עזבני יי' ויי' שכחני
היינו עזובה היינו שכחה אמר ריש לקיש אמרה כנסת ישראל לפני הקב"ה רבש"ע אדם נושא אשה על אשתו ראשונה זוכר מעשה הראשונה אתה עזבתני ושכחתני

> "But Zion said, 'The Lord has forsaken me, and the Lord has forgotten me'" (Isa. 49:14). Is not "forsaken" the same as "forgotten?" Resh Lakish said: The community of Israel said to the Holy One blessed be He, "Master of the Universe, when a man takes a second wife after his first, he still remembers the deeds of the first. You have both forsaken and forgotten me!"[8]

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[7] This principle is often expressed: *kol yisrael arevin zeh b'zeh* [all Israel is responsible for one another].

[8] *Berakhot* 32b.

Zion voices a startling accusation: God is not even as faithful as a human husband, unfairly forgetting the historical relationship of Israel and her Divine "spouse." God responds that, on the contrary, it is impossible to forget:

> °תתשכח אשה עולה אמר הקב"ה כלום
> אשכח עולות אילים ופטרי רחמים שהקרבת לפני במדבר אמרה לפניו רבש"ע הואיל ואין שכחה לפני בסא כבודך שמא לא תשכח לי מעשה העגל אמר לה °גם אלה תשכחנה אמרה לפניו רבש"ע הואיל ויש שכחה לפני כסא כבודך שמא תשכח לי מעשה סיני אמר לה °ואנכי לא אשכחך
>
> "`Can a woman forget her sucking child [*ullah*]?´" (Isa. 49:15). Said the Holy One blessed be He, "Can I possibly forget the burnt offerings [*olah*] of rams and the firstborn of animals that you offered to Me in the wilderness?"
>
> Then Israel said, "Master of the Universe, since there is no forgetfulness before the throne of Your glory, perhaps You will not forget the sin of the golden calf?" God replied, "Surely, `these´ will be forgotten" (v. 15).[9]
>
> Then Israel said, "Master of the Universe, since [You admit] there is forgetfulness before the throne of Your glory, You may also forget my conduct at Sinai?!" God answered her, "Yet `I´ will not forget you" (v. 15).[10]

As it turns out, God is even more faithful, more gracious than any human partner could ever be. Israel presses not simply for justice, but for mercy, for grace, for the generous memory of a loving Mate who remembers only the beautiful qualities. The severe aspect of punishment does not, by itself, comprise Divine Justice. Rather, it

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[9] Rashi: The incident of the golden calf, during which they said "These are your gods, Israel" (Ex. 32:4). A literal rendering of Isa. 49:15 yields "These may forget...."

[10] Rashi: This is the revelation at Sinai, for it is said: "I am the Lord your God" (Ex. 20:2).

entails forgiveness, too -- constancy and consistency, mercy and love.

> A promise is a promise. A commitment is a commitment. God can no more repudiate a promise than he can be unjust. He cannot be capricious. Constancy is the very essence of God.[11]

A natural choice to make such claims on God is Abraham, father of the people and advocate for the possibility of righteousness in Sodom and Gomorrah. "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justly?" (Gen. 18:25). Often, the Talmud chooses such Biblical paradigms of piety to protest. Their faith is proven, so there will be no mistaking their *hutspa* for heresy. Their faith is proven, making more powerful their objections. Their faith is proven, and its reward passes on to future generations, according to the principle of *z'khut avot* (merit of our ancestors). It is quite fitting for the Rabbis to appropriate them as their spokespersons. With a sophisticated understanding of their own methods, the Sages speak more often through Abraham and Moses than Isaiah, Jeremiah and Job. They choose those who clearly prevail in the Biblical argument with God. If God remains unmoved by their pleas, perhaps it cannot be done. In the following passage, Abraham is engaged in a new debate -- this time on behalf of Israel. He is still gentle and persistent.

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[11] Blank, "Doest Thou Well to Be Angry?," Hebrew Union College Annual 26 (1955): 39.

א"ר יצחק בשעה שחרב בית
המקדש מצאו הקב"ה לאברהם שהיה עומד
בבית המקדש אמר לו מה לידידי בביתי אמר
לו על עיסקי בני באתי אמר לו בניך חטאו
וגלו אמר לו שמא בשוגג חטאו אמר לו
°עשותה המזימתה אמר לו שמא מיעוטן
חטאו אמר לו הרבים היה לך לזכור ברית
מילה אמר לו °ובשר קדש יעברו מעליך
אמר לו שמא אם הבתנת להם היו חוזרין
בתשובה אמר לו °כי רעתיכי או תעלוזי מיד
הניח ידיו על ראשו והיה צועק ובוכה
ואמר לו שמא חס ושלום אין להם תקנה
יצתה בת קול ואמרה לו °זית רענן יפה פרי
תואר קרא ה' שמך כה זית זו אחריתו בסופו
אף ישראל אחריתן בסופן

R. Isaac said: At the time of the destruction of the Temple the Holy One blessed be He encountered Abraham standing in the [ruins]. God said, "What is My beloved doing in My house?" (Jer. 11:15). Abraham answered, "I have come in regard to the doings of my children."

"Your children sinned and have gone into exile." [Abraham defended them:] "Perhaps they sinned only in error."

"She deliberately wrought lewdness" (v. 15).[12]

"Perhaps only a few of them sinned."

"[No,] the many [have sinned]" (v. 15).

"Still, You should have remembered the covenant of circumcision."

"The hallowed flesh is removed from you" (v. 15).[13]

"Perhaps if You had waited for them, they would have returned in repentance."

"When you do evil, then you rejoice" (v. 15).[14]

Then Abraham placed his hands on his head, weeping and crying out, "Perhaps, God forbid, there is no hope for them." A Heavenly Voice came forth and announced, "'The Lord called your name an olive tree, fair with goodly fruit' (v. 16); just as the olive tree produces its best only at the very end,

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[12] Rashi: All of their deeds were premeditated and consciously intended.

[13] Rashi: They disguised their circumcision.

[14] Rashi: In the hour of their rejoicing, they cling more strongly to their wickedness and do not repent.

so Israel will flourish at the end."[15]

Abraham's dialogue with God is startlingly intimate. He raises a series of questions and objections: Are You sure they purposefully sinned? Are so many truly guilty? Should You not have exercised more restraint for the sake of the covenant? Could You not wait, to see if they would repent? At each step God defends the Divine decree but, in the end, God promises ultimate reward for Israel.

II. Ineffective Challenges, Negative Responses

God's response, however, is not always so satisfying:

אמר רב יהודה
אמר רב בשעה *שעלה משה למרום מצאו
להקב"ה שיושב וקושר כתרים לאותיות
אמר לפניו רבש"ע מי מעכב על ידך אמר לו
אדם אחד יש שעתיד להיות בסוף כמה דורות
ועקיבא בן יוסף שמו שעתיד לדרוש על כל
קץ וקץ תילין תילין של הלכות אמר לפניו
רבש"ע הראהו לי אמר לו חזור לאחורך הלך
וישב בסוף ג שמונה שורות ולא היה יודע
מה הן אומרים תשש כחו כיון שהגיע לדבר
ז אחד אמרו לותלמידיו רבי מנין לך אמר להן
הלכה למשה מסיני נתיישבה דעתו חזר
ט ובא לפני הקב"ה אמר לפניו רבונו של
עולם יש לך אדם כזה ואתה נותן תורה ע"י
אמר לו שתוק כך עלה במחשבה לפני אמר
לפניו רבונו של עולם הראיתני תורתו הראני
שכרו אמר לו חזור י [לאחורך] חזר לאחוריו
ראה ששוקלין בשרו במקולין אמר לפניו
רבש"ע "זו תורה וזו שכרה א"ל שתיק כך
עלה במחשבה לפני

Rav Judah said in the name of Rav: When Moses ascended on high, he [was surprised to] find the Holy One Blessed be He sitting and affixing crowns

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[15] *Menahot* 53b. Abraham similarly pushes God for assurances regarding Israel's future welfare in *Megillah* 31b and *Taanit* 27b. In these examples, the conversation is an *aggadic* elaboration of the covenant between the parts.

> to the letters. Moses said, "Master of the Universe, for whom do You need to add such detail?"[16] God replied, "There will be a man, at the end of many generations, whose name is Akiba b. Joseph. He is destined to expound, on each [crown], mounds and mounds of laws." Said Moses, "Permit me to see him," and God replied, "Turn around."
>
> [Moses saw a vision of the future, in which] he sat [at the back,] behind eight rows [of Akiba's students], and did not understand a word. He became discouraged. But when they arrived at a certain subject, the students asked, "Rabbi, on what basis do you know this?" and Akiba replied, "It is a tradition going back to Moses at Sinai." Moses was comforted.
>
> He returned to the Holy One Blessed be He, saying, "Master of the Universe, You have a man such as this, yet You give the Torah by me?!" God replied, "Be silent, for My mind is decided."[17]
>
> Moses said, "You have shown me his great learning; now show me his reward," and God said, "Turn around." He turned and saw them weighing out Akiba's flesh in market stalls. "Master of the Universe! Is **this** the reward for such learning?!" God said, "Be silent, for My mind is decided."[18]

In the aftermath of the Bar Kokhba rebellion, Akiba is imprisoned by the Romans for continuing to teach Torah in defiance of an edict, and is later executed in torturous fashion. The fact that the pious, scholarly Akiba should die such a cruel death strikes at the very heart of human conceptions of justice. Moses challenges God and, in this instance, his *hutspa* is not effective. Although God enables him to see the future, Moses is powerless to influence it. Even acting in the humble role of scribe

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[16] Literally, "Who delays Your hand?"

[17] A loose, but appropriate translation might be, "Shut up! It's none of your business."

[18] *Menahot* 29b.

(carefully adding crowns to the letters of a Torah scroll), God is still the Master of history. Moses is silenced.

Challenges to Divine justice do not always demand greater mercy from God. It is also suggested that God "errs" in the opposite direction, so concerned with reconciliation with Israel, the extension of mercy sometimes compromises Divine justice.[19] In *Sanhedrin* 103a, the Attribute of Justice advises against forgiving Manasseh, a king of Judah so wicked, sincere repentance is impossible. God ignores this opinion, however, and makes an opening in heaven -- admitting him, as Rashi says, "without the knowledge of the Attribute of Justice." Although not phrased as a direct challenge, the implication is clear: God deceives and circumvents justice. It may be unseemly for one of God's anointed to be refused entry into heaven, but it is theologically problematic for the unworthy Manasseh to be forgiven by God.

Since Moses and the Attribute of Justice are silenced, only the telling of the story attests to the ongoing sense of injustice, the unresolved nature of the complaint. Questioning the Divine will is of no avail.

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[19] There is Biblical precedent for this attitude as well. Consider the case of Jonah, who feels God's forgiveness of Nineveh compromises truth and justice. In Jonah's case, the Rabbis radically reinterpret his motives, to change the dynamic of the complaint.

As might be expected, not only the efficacy, but also the correctness of challenging God, at times is in doubt. R. Nahman, in Rav's name, interprets a verse in Proverbs, "...the rich answer insolently" (18:23), as referring to Joshua. Several possible examples are suggested, in which Joshua challenges the justice of a punishment God imposed for the taking of spoil, or the wisdom of bringing the people across the Jordan to settle.[20] No punishment is recorded for Joshua's alleged insolence, but neither are his objections effective. The punishment for taking spoil is severe[21], and the people cross over the Jordan at God's command, despite any reluctance Joshua may have. The mere appellation of insolence to Joshua's question suggests that Biblical impudence was not blindly accepted by the Rabbis as a positive role model. Often, *hutspa k'lapei shamaya* receives much harsher treatment. In the following passage, for example, Moses is punished for his argument. Despite the *aggadot* that record Abraham's pressing for reassurances regarding the welfare of his people, here he is held up as a model of unquestioning faithfulness for Moses to emulate.

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[20] *Sanhedrin* 44a. In the Bible, Joshua actually is very zealous for God's word and reverent in the matter of taking spoil; there is a direct quote, however (Josh. 7:7), in which Joshua questions the move across the river.

[21] The one guilty of taking spoil is stoned and burned (Josh. 7:25).

תניא אמר ר' אלעזר ברבי יוסי
פעם אחת נכנסתי לאלכסנדריא של מצרים
מצאתי זקן אחד ואמר לי בא ואראך מה
עשו אבותי לאבותיך מהם טבעו בים מהם
הרגו בחרב מהם מעכו בבנין ועל דבר זה
נענש משה רבינו שנא' °ובואו באתי אל
פרעה לדבר בשמך הרע לעם הזה אמר לו
הקב"ה חבל על דאבדין ולא מישתכחין הדי
כמה פעמים נגליתי על אברהם יצחק ויעקב
באל שדי ולא הרהרו על מדותי ולא אמרו
לי מה שמך אמרתי לאברהם °קום התהלך
בארץ לארכה ולרחבה כי לך אתננה *בקש
מקום לקבור את שרה ולא מצא עד שקנה
בד' מאות שקל כסף ולא הרהר על מדותי

It has been taught -- R. Eleazar, son of R. Yosi, said: I once visited Alexandria, Egypt and found an old man there, who said to me, "Come and I will show you what my ancestors did to yours; some of them they drowned in the sea, others they slew by the sword, and still others they crushed in buildings." And for this Moses our teacher was punished, as it is said, "For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has done [even more] evil to this people; [still You have not delivered Your people at all]" (Ex. 5:23). The Holy One blessed be He responded, "Alas for those [faithful] who are gone and no more to be found! I revealed Myself many times to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob by the name of *El Shaddai* and they did not question My attributes, nor say to Me, `What is Your name?´ I said to Abraham, `Arise, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I will give it to you´ (Gen. 13:17); yet when he sought a place to bury Sarah, he had none; he had to purchase one for four hundred silver shekels. Still he did not question My attributes."

Similar examples are cited for the other patriarchs, and Moses is punished for his faithlessness by dying before the people enter the promised land.[22] He does not simply recall God´s promise; he casts doubt upon it. By protesting the justice or effectiveness of God´s method of deliverance, Moses merely ensures that he will not see

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[22] *Sanhedrin* 111a.

its ultimate fulfillment. There is no indication that Moses changes God's plan by his protest; God intends all along to accomplish the promised redemption. As with the sun and moon, the challenge ironically serves to justify God's actions, by giving cause for Moses' death before entering the Promised Land. Such a punishment for questioning God's attributes at all makes clear that there is concern about taking an 'audacious position against God. It may be pointless. It may have pointedly unfavorable results. Questioning God's justice is not a minor challenge, and one would, perhaps, expect the Talmud to make clear the dangers of such disrespect.

III. Challenges Effective

Nevertheless, there is also strong sentiment that such *hutzpa*, even against Heaven, can be effective.[23] God gives in, changes a decision, acknowledges the validity of the human position, and may even be grateful for these confrontations about justice. This is true for *aggadot* about Biblical characters and about the Rabbis themselves.

A. In Tension

Still, the tension in such an intimate relationship

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[23] The phrasing is from *Sanhedrin* 105a (see above, p. 17).

with God is implicit. Two contradictory principles are at issue: God is Master of the Universe, so countering the Divine conception of justice may have devastating consequences. Yet the human voice in such deliberations is affirmed. To some extent, this paradox is implicit in each *aggadah* that opens with the standard formula; the human voice introduces a challenge with the words, "Master of the Universe."

The dynamic is expressed in a variety of forms. The following passage, for instance, portrays Hannah, Elijah, and Moses speaking insolently to God. Even though they "hurl their words against Heaven," God listens to them.

אם ראה
תראה א"ר אלעזר אמרה חנה לפני הקב"ה רבונו של עולם אם ראה מוטב ואם לאו תראה אלך ואסתתר בפני
אלקנה בעלי וכיון דמסתתרנא משקו לי מי סוטה ואי אתה עושה תורתך פלסתר שנאמר °ונקתה ונזרעה זרע ...
דתניא °ונקתה ונזרעה זרע מלמד °שאם היתה עקרה נפקדת דברי ר' ישמעאל

> "If You will indeed look [at the affliction of your handmaid...and give to your handmaid a son]" (I Sam. 1:11). R. Eleazar said: Hannah challenged the Holy One blessed be He: "Master of the Universe, if You will look, it is well. But if You will not look, I will go and shut myself up with someone else with the knowledge of my husband Elkanah, and since I will have been in private [with a man], they will make me drink the water of the wife suspected of adultery. You cannot falsify Your law, which says, `She shall be cleared and shall conceive seed'" (Num. 5:28).... As it is said: "She shall be cleared and shall conceive seed" -- according to R. Ishmael, this teaches that if she was barren she is remembered [becomes pregnant].[24]

Hannah hopes that, since she will not have committed

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[24] *Berakhot* 31b.

adultery but only have given the appearance of it, the "law" pertaining to a woman cleared of such charges will apply to her: she will conceive. Although not all the Rabbis agree that the law applies to a barren woman, no punishment is suggested for the imagined blackmail. In fact, Hannah does conceive and gives birth to a son. R. Eleazar cites another teaching in which Hannah communicates her assumption that God is just, that the Almighty creates nothing without cause. To her, this means that she should have a baby, and so she demands from God, Creator of the female breast, the opportunity to nurse a son. The Rabbis base Hannah's case on God's reputation and her own innocence, not unlike the other Biblical figures who question God's administration of the universe. It is possible that R. Eleazar brings these teachings because of a tradition he has, that

> חנה הטיחה דברים כלפי מעלה שנאמר ותתפלל על יי' מלמד שהטיחה דברים כלפי מעלה
>
> Hannah hurled words against Heaven, as it says, "And Hannah prayed unto/against [*al*] the Lord" (I Sam. 1:10). This teaches that she hurled words against Heaven.[25]

R. Eleazer picks up on the fact that the Biblical verse is unusual: *al Adonai* instead of *el Adonai*. From it, he constructs conversations in which the barren and bereft Hannah, in desperation, speaks out against God, challenging Divine justice. It is also noted that Elijah

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[25] ibid.

and Moses hurl words against Heaven. In these two cases, textual evidence is offered demonstrating that God acknowledges the validity of their position.

ואי"ר
אלעזר אלידו המיח דברים כלפי מעלה שנאמר "ואתה הסבות את לבם אחורנית א"ר שמואל בר רב יצחק
מנין שחזר הקב"ה והודה לו לאליהו דכתיב "ואשר דברעתי:

> R. Eleazar said: Elijah [also] hurled words against Heaven, as it says, "For You have turned their heart backwards" (I Kings 18:37).[26] R. Samuel b. Isaac said: How do we know that the Holy One blessed be He admitted Elijah was right? Because it says "And whom I have wronged" (Micah 4:6).[27]

Elijah is suggesting that it is God's fault the people worshipped idols! Isaiah also blames God (p. 11), but here the Rabbis believe that God acknowledges the accusation is valid: "I have wronged" them by creating the evil inclination and punishing the people for their susceptibility. Moses uses similar reasoning to secure forgiveness for the people: God is at least partially responsible for their sin.

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[26] R. Alexandri's private concluding prayer for the *amidah* makes a similar accusation: "Master of all worlds, it is known full well to You that our will is to perform Your will, and what prevents us? The yeast in the dough [the evil inclination] and the subjugation to foreign powers" (*Berakhot* 17a).

In *Baba Batra* 16a, a similar complaint by Job is addressed by Rav, who says that dust should be stuffed in Job's mouth for arguing with God at all, and for placing his claims on a par with Divine judgement. A more direct response is also given: God created Torah as well, as an "antidote."

[27] *Berakhot* 31b. Rashi: The verse reads, "I will assemble her that halts, and I will gather her that is driven away, and whom I have wronged" -- I caused the sin by creating the evil inclination.

ואמר רבי אלעזר משה הטיח
דברים כלפי מעלה שנאמר °ויתפלל משה אל יי' אל תקרי אל יי אלא על
יי' שכן דבי ר' אליעזר בן יעקב °קורין לאלפין עיינין ולעיינין אלפין דבי ר'
ינאי אמרי מהכא °די זהב מאי ודי זהב אמרי °דבי רבי ינאי כך אמר משה
לפני הקב"ה רבונו של עולם בשביל בסף וזהב שהשפעת להם לישראל עד
שאמרו די הוא גרם שעשו את העגל...

אמר רבי איסיא משל לאדם
שהיתה לו פרה כחושה ובעלת אברים האכילה ברשינין והיתה מבעטת בו
אמר לה מי גרם ליך שתהא מבעטת בי אלא ברשינין שהאכלתיך אמר רבי
חייא בר אבא אמר רבי יוחנן משל לאדם אחד שהיה לו בן הרחיצו וסכו
והאכילו והשקהו ותלה לו כיס על צווארו והושיבו על פתח של זונות מה יעשה אותו הבן שלא יחטא
אמר רב אחא ברית דרב הונא אמר רב ששת הינו דאמרי אינשי מלי פריסיה גי בישי שני °כמרעיתם
וישבעו שבעו וירם לבם על כן שכחוני רב נחמן אמר מהכא °ורם לבבך ושכחת את יי' והכתן אמרי מהכא
°ואכל ושבע והשן ופנה ואי בעית אימא מהכא °וישמן ישורון ויבעט אמר רבי שמואל בר נחמני אמר רבי
יונתן מנין שחזר הקדוש ברוך הוא והודה לו למשה שנאמר °וכסף הרביתי להם והם עשו לבעל:...

°ועתה הניחה לי
ריחר אפי בהם ואכלם ואעשה אותך לגוי גדול וגו' אמר רבי אבדו אלמלא מקרא בתוב אי אפשר לאומרו
מלמד שתפסו משה להקדוש ברוך הוא כאדם שהוא תופס את חבירו בבגדו ואמר לפניו רבונו של עולם אין
אני מניחך עד שתמחול ותסלח להם:

R. Eleazar said: Moses hurled words against Heaven, as it says, "And Moses prayed unto the Lord" (Num. 11:2). Read not *el* [unto], but *al* [against], for so in the school of R. Eliezer b. Yaakov *alefs* were pronounced like *ayins* and vice versa.

The school of R. Yannai said [we derive it] from here: "And *Di-Zahav*" (Deut. 1:1). What does this mean? They said in the school of R. Yannai: Thus spoke Moses before the Holy One blessed be He: "Master of the Universe, the silver and gold [*zahav*] which You showered on Israel until they said, 'Enough' [*dai*] -- this is what led to their making the golden calf...."

R. Oshaia said: It is like the case of a man who had a lean but large-limbed cow. He gave it lupines to eat and it commenced to kick him. He said to it, "What caused you to kick me? Surely, it must be the lupines that I fed you with."

R. Hiyya b. Abba said in the name of R. Yohanan: It is like the case of a man who had a son; he bathed him, perfumed him, and gave him plenty to eat and drink. Then he hung a purse around his neck and set him down at the entrance of a house of prostitution. How could this boy avoid sinning?

R. Aha the son of R. Huna said in the name of R. Sheshet: This bears out the saying: A full stomach [leads down the path to ruin], as it says, "When they were fed they became full; they were filled and their heart became haughty; therefore they have forgotten Me" (Hos. 13:6).

R. Nahman said [we derive] it from this verse: "Then your heart was lifted up and you forget the Lord" (Deut. 8:14). The Rabbis said it is from

here: "And they will have eaten their fill and waxen fat, and turned to other gods" (Deut. 31:10). Or if you prefer, from here: "But Yeshurun waxed fat and kicked" (Deut 32:15).

R. Samuel b. Nahmani said in the name of R. Yonatan: How do we know that the Holy One blessed be He retracted, admitting Moses was right? Because it says, "And I multiplied for her silver and gold, which they used for Baal" (Hos. 2:10)....

"Now therefore let Me alone that My wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them, and I will make of you a great nation," etc. (Ex. 32:10). R. Abbahu said: Were it not explicitly written, it would be impossible to say such a thing. This teaches that Moses took hold of the Holy One blessed be He, like one who seizes his fellow by his garment and said, "Master of the Universe, I will not let You go until You forgive and pardon them."[28]

This assortment of parables and exegeses eventually lands upon the most famous Biblical model of Moses taking issue with Divine judgement (Ex. 32, see above, p. 19ff.). A number of additional interpretations about his interaction with God are offered by various authorities. Included among these is a series of word plays on the verse, "And Moses besought [*wa-yehal*] the Lord" (Ex. 32:11). R. Eleazar teaches that Moses argued with God until he wearied [*hehelahu*] the Holy One blessed be He. The Rabbis teach that Moses claimed it would be a profanation [*hullin*] for God to wipe out the people. The numerous teachings collected in this passage have one significant point in common: Moses challenges the justice of God punishing Israel, and tries to change the Divine decree. Again, the *hutzpa* is effective:

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[28] *Berakhot* 31b-32a.

א"ר יוחנן מנין שחזר הקב"ה והודה לו למשה שנאמר "ויאמר י"י סלחתי כדבריך

R. Yohanan said: How do we know that the Holy One blessed be He retracted, admitting Moses was right? Because it says, "And the Lord said, `I have pardoned according to your word´" (Num. 14:20).[29]

In deferring to Moses´ judgement, God is either succumbing to his tenacity, or admitting to Divine guilt. As startling as such a concept may be, the tension within this collection of traditions regarding Hannah, Elijah and Moses is minimal. The Rabbis merely acknowledge that it is a bold, if effective, way to approach God. They do this by grouping them together with the phrase: *hittiah d´varim k´lapei ma´aleh* [hurled words against Heaven]. Such an image suggests words hastily spoken in argument, designed to hurt as well as to make a point. From Elijah´s perspective, for instance, surely faith in the one God would have triumphed if God had helped, or even done nothing. Yet God hardens the hearts of the people. How does this serve the Divine purpose? How unfair it seems, especially for a people who once proclaimed, "All that the Lord has spoken, we will do!" (Ex. 19:8). The rage inside Elijah boils over, and he hurls his words against Heaven.[30] Within Hannah´s argument, one can almost hear the added complaint: So You would make me

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29 ibid.

30 M.Z. Levinson-Labie, "*Hattahat D´varim K´lapei Ma´aleh*" (Hurling Words Against Heaven), Sefer HaShannot: The American Hebrew Yearbook (New York, 1938), 114-5.

play the harlot in order to get a child? Within Moses', one hears: So what did You expect? Surely You must understand basic human psychology! Their tone is strikingly different than, for example, Abraham's gentle, persistent argument (*Menahot* 53b, see above, p. 33).

Other spokespersons for Israel also boldly approach God. Here, the tension implicit in such challenges is expressed by voicing two distinct opinions within the *aggadah*:

בא והבטן לפני
המקום אמר לפניו רבש"ע על אלו יפלו כ"ד
אלף מישראל שנאמר °ויהיו המתים במגפה
ארבעה ועשרים אלף והייט דכתיב °ויעמד פנחס ויפלל *אמר רבי אלעזר
ויתפלל לא נאמר אלא ויפלל מלמד בביכול שעשה פלילות עם קונו בקשו
מלאבי השרת לדחפו אמר להן הניחו לו קנאי בן קנאי הוא משיב חימה בן
משיב חימה הוא

[Pinhas argues for justice when God sends a plague:]
Then Pinhas came and struck them [Cozbi and Zimri] down before the Omnipresent saying, "Master of the Universe, shall twenty-four thousand perish because of these?!" As it is written, "And those that died in the plague were twenty-four thousand" (Num. 25:9). Hence it is written, "Then Pinhas stood up and executed judgement [*wa-yefallel*, also 'to intercede']" (Ps. 106:30). R. Eleazar said: *Wa-yitpallel* [he prayed] is not written, but *wa-yefallel*, as though he argued with his Maker [about the justice of punishing so many on account of two sinners].
Thereupon, the ministering angels wished to cast [Pinhas] out, but God said to them, "Leave him alone, for he is a zealot and the descendant of a zealot, one who turns away wrath and the descendant of one who turns away wrath."[31]

The angels have no patience for such impudence, but God seems glad that Pinhas challenges the justice of God's decision, for it "turns away [God's] wrath." One

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[31] *Sanhedrin* 82b.

challenge. Two responses.

When the angel Gabriel chides God for shaming the children of Abraham and Sarah, the Rabbis ask if he, indeed, has license to reproach God so freely.

בשעה שאמר לו הקב"ה ליחזקאל הלך
אמור להם לישראל אביך האמורי ואמך
חתית אמרה רות פסקנית לפני הקב"ה
רבש"ע אם יבואו אברהם ושרה ויעמדו
לפניך אתה אומר להם ומכלים אותם ריבך
ריב את רעך וסוד אחר אל תגל ומי איכא
ליה רשותא טולי האי דא"ר יוסי ברבי
חנינא שלש שמות יש לו פיסקון איטמון
סיגרון פיסקון שפיסק דברים כלפי מעלה

When the Holy One blessed be He said to Ezekiel, "Go and say unto Israel: An Amorite was your father, and your mother was a Hittite" (Ezek. 16:3), the intercessory spirit [*ruah piskonit*] challenged the Holy One blessed be He. "Master of the Universe! If Abraham and Sarah came and stood before You, would you say this to them and put them to shame? `Debate your cause with your neighbor, but reveal not the secret of another´ (Prov. 25:8)."

But has he so much license? Yes. For R. Yosi son of R. Hanina said: He has three names -- *Pisakon, Itamon, Sigaron. Pisakon,* because he argues against [*posek*] the Most High.[32]

Rashi identifies the intercessory spirit as the angel Gabriel. The verse from Proverbs which Gabriel uses to back up his case implies that a private rebuke is acceptable, but not public shame. By giving Ezekiel a prophecy which indicts Israel for her sins and impugns her ancestry as a sign of the long history of abominations, God subjects not only Israel but also her pious ancestors, Abraham and Sarah, to precisely such public degradation. This not only violates Gabriel´s

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[32] *Sanhedrin* 44b.

sense of fairness; it also goes against Torah. Again, by questioning Gabriel's right to speak out and then affirming it, the two conflicting opinions cited about *hutzpa k'lapei shamaya* reflect the tension of challenge.

Based on such explicit and exegetical Biblical models, the Rabbis, too, boldly stand up against God. Often their challenges of Divine justice are in connection with efforts to effect rain, the most famous case being that of Honi, the circle-drawer. Here, too, the tension regarding such an approach is evident within the text. Although he is quite effective, his methods incur heavy criticism from the *nasi* of the Sanhedrin.

ת"ד פעם אחת יצא רוב אדר ולא ירדו
גשמים שלחו לחוני המעגל התפלל וירדו
גשמים התפלל ולא ירדו גשמים עג עוגה
ועמד בתוכה כדרך שעשה חבקוק הנביא
שנאמר °על משמרתי אעמדה ואתיצבה על
מצור וגו' אמר לפניו רבונו של עולם בניך
שמו פניהם עלי שאני כבן בית לפניך נשבע
אני בשמך הגדול שאיני זז מכאן עד
שתרחם על בניך התחילו גשמים מנטפין
אמרו לו תלמידיו רבי ראינוך ולא נמות
כמרומין אנו שאין גשמים יורדין אלא להתיר
שבועתך אמר (ו) לא כך שאלתי אלא
גשמי בורות שיחין ומערות ירדו בזעף עד שכל טפה וטפה כמלא פי
חבית ושיערו חכמים שאין טפה פחותה מלוג אמרו לו תלמידיו רבי ראינוך ולא נמות כמדומין אנו
שאין גשמים יורדין אלא לאבד העולם אמר לפניו לא כך שאלתי אלא גשמי רצון ברכה ונדבה
ירדו כתיקנן עד שעלו כל העם להר הבית מפני הגשמים אמרו לו רבי בשם שהתפללת שירדו כך
התפלל וילכו להם אמר להם כך מקובלני שאין מתפללין על רוב הטובה אעפ"כ הביאו לי פר הודאה
הביאו לו פר הודאה סמך שתי ידיו עליו ואמר לפניו רבש"ע עמך ישראל שהוצאת ממצרים אינן
יכולין (ז) לא ברוב טובה ולא ברוב פורענות בעסת עליהם אינן יכולין לעמד השפעת עליהם טובה
אינן יכולין לעמד יהי רצון מלפניך שיפסקו הגשמים ויהא ריוח בעולם מיד נשבה הרוח ונתפזרו העבים
ורחה הרחמה ויצאו העם לשדה והביאו להם כמהין ופטריות *שלח לו שמעון בן שטח אלמלא חוני
אתה גוזרני עליך נידוי (א) שאילו שנים כשני אליהו שמפתחות גשמים ביחי של אליהו לא נמצא שם
שמים מתחלל על ידך אבל מה אעשה לך שאתה מתחטא לפני המקום ועושה לך רצונך כבן
שמתחטא על אביו ועושה לו רצונו

The Rabbis taught: Once it happened that the greater part of the month of Adar had gone and yet no rain had fallen. The people sent a message to Honi the circle-drawer: Pray that rain may fall. He

prayed and no rain fell. He then drew a circle and stood inside it, in the same way the prophet Habakkuk had done, as it is said, "I will stand upon my watch, and set myself upon the tower, [until I see how He answers me,]" etc. (Hab. 2:1). He exclaimed, "Master of the Universe, Your children have turned to me because they believe me to be a member of Your household. I swear by Your great name that I will not move from here until You have mercy upon Your children." Rain began to drip and his students said to him, "We look to you to save us from death; we believe that this rain came down merely to release you from your oath."

Honi then exclaimed, "It is not for this that I have prayed, but for rain to fill cisterns, ditches and caves." The rain then began to come down with great force, every drop being as big as the opening of a barrel and the Sages estimated that no one drop was less than a *log*. His students then said to him, "Master, we look to you to save us from death; we believe this rain came down to destroy the world."

He then exclaimed, "It is not for this that I have prayed, but for rain of benevolence, blessing and bounty." Then rain fell normally until the Israelites were compelled to go up to the Temple Mount [for shelter] on account of the rain. They then said to him, "Master, in the same way as you have prayed for the rain to fall, pray for the rain to cease." He replied, "I have it as a tradition that we may not pray on account of an excess of good. Nevertheless, bring me a bullock for a thanksgiving offering." They brought him one and he laid his two hands upon it and said, "Master of the Universe, Your people Israel whom You have brought out from Egypt cannot endure an excess of good nor an excess of punishment. When You were angry with them, they could not endure it; when You did shower upon them an excess of good, they could not endure it. May it be Your will that the rain may cease and that there be relief for the world."

Immediately, the wind began to blow and the clouds were dispersed; the sun shone and the people went out into the fields and gathered for themselves mushrooms and truffles.

Thereupon, Simeon b. Shetah (*nasi*) sent this message to him: Were it not that you are Honi, I would have placed you under the ban, for were these years like the years of Elijah, during which Elijah

> had the keys to rain in his hand,[33] would not the name of Heaven be profaned through you?! But what shall I do to you who acts petulantly before the Omnipresent who grants your desire, as a son who acts petulantly before his father and he grants his desires.

Simeon b. Shetah's condemnation is not echoed by all the Sanhedrin. They send a message to Honi, applying the verse, "You shall also decree a thing, and it will be established for you, and light will shine upon you" (Job 22:28ff.) to his prayer. "You have decreed below and the Holy One blessed be He fulfilled your word above.... You have illumined with your prayer a generation in darkness." He is called righteous and is praised for his ability to resolve disputes in the *bet hamidrash*.[34]

The line between intimacy with God and blasphemy is often hard to trace; it is thin, broken, shifting. Honi's status and the circumstances grant him greater license. "Rooted deeply in the human experience of adversity and anguish, it [boldness with regard to Heaven] opens onto a landscape where God and human beings walk as friends."[35] Honi does not accept God's overly literal answers to his prayers; rather, he persists until Israel receives the amount of rain that he and his people

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[33] Elijah made an oath in the name of God that there would be no rain for years.

[34] *Taanit* 23a.

[35] Belden C. Lane, "*Hutspa K'lapei Shamaya*: A Christian Response to the Jewish Tradition of Arguing with God," Journal of Ecumenical Studies 23:4 (1986): 567.

judge is appropriate. He makes God "play fair." Other Rabbis make rather bold arguments as well; for example, R. Hiyya b. Luliani argues that God basically owes Israel rain because they accepted the Torah. There is a significant distinction between expressing hope or even confidence that God will be merciful, and attributing to God an obligation to do so.[36] R. Hama b. Hanina calls Heaven callous for not listening to his prayers for rain. Levi exclaims, "Master of the Universe, You went up and took Your seat on high, and have no mercy on Your children." These calls for justice and mercy (in the form of rain) are all ultimately effective, yet not without danger. According to R. Eleazar, Levi becomes lame, partly as a result of his audacity before God: "Let a man never hurl words against Heaven, seeing that one great man did speak in such a reproachful manner towards God and he became lame; his name is Levi."[37]

B. Positive Response

There is not always a price to pay, however, nor criticism from God, the angels or the Rabbis.

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[36] Heinemann, "Law-Court Patterns in Prayer," 199.

[37] *Taanit* 25a. Similarly, *Megillah* 22b, *Sukkah* 53a. There are many examples of rainmakers in Taanit, including the case of Nakdimon (19b-20a) whose rhetoric could also be considered challenging. See also the case of Hanina b. Dosa (24b, *Yoma* 53b); his prayers are so effective that R. Joseph complains they negate those of the high priest.

Sometimes *hutspa k'lapei shamaya* simply works. When Benjamin the Righteous is about to die at a young age, the angels protest that it is unjust.

תניא אמרו עליו על בנימין
הצדיק שהיה ממונה על קופה של צדקה פעם
אחת באתה אשה לפניו בשני בצורת אמרה
לו רבי פרנסני אמר לה העבודה שאין בקופה
של צדקה כלום אמרה לו רבי אם אין אתה
מפרנסני הרי אשה ושבעה בניה מתים עמד
ופרנסה מישלו לימים חלה ונטה למות אמרו
מלאכי השרת לפני הקב"ה רבש"ע אתה
אמרת א"כל המקיים נפש אחת מישראל
כאילו קיים עולם מלא ובנימין הצדיק
שהחיה אשה ושבעה בניה ימות בשנים
מועטות הללו מיד קרעו לו גזר דינו

It has been taught: The following incident is related of Benjamin the Righteous who was a supervisor of the charity fund. One day a woman came to him in a year of scarcity, and said to him: "Sir, sustain me." He replied, "The fact is that there is not a penny in the charity fund."

She said, "If you do not sustain me, a woman and her seven children will die." He then gave her sustenance out of his own pocket.

Some time afterwards he became ill, at the point of death. The angels questioned the Holy One blessed be He, saying, "Master of the Universe, You have said that he who preserves one soul of Israel is considered as if he had preserved the whole world. Shall then Benjamin the Righteous, who preserved the life of a woman and her seven children, die at so early an age?!" Immediately, his death sentence was torn up.[38]

When the sea threatens to capsize a ship on which Rabban Gamaliel is travelling, he surmises that it is God punishing him for excommunicating R. Eliezer. He protests the unfairness of this retribution, since he had acted for God's honor, to prevent strife from multiplying

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[38] *Baba Batra* 11a.

in Israel. The storm ceases to rage.[39] Not only revered scholars and righteous Jews can reverse Divine decrees, but average people as well.

יומא דנח נפשיה דליה זעפא ודרי להדוא טייעא כי רכיב גמלא מהאי גיסא
דנהר פפא ושדייה בהך גיסא אמר מאי האי אמרי ליה נח נפשיה דרבה
בר נחמני אמר לפניו רבונו של עולם כולי עלמא דידך הוא ורבה בר נחמני
דידך את דרבה ורבה דידך אמאי קא מחרבת ליה לעלמא נח זעפא
ההוא

On the day that [Rabbah b. Nahmani] died, a hurricane lifted an Arab merchant who was riding a camel on one bank of the River Papa, and cast him down on the other. "What is [the meaning of] this?" he cried out. He was told, "Rabbah b. Nahmani has died." He exclaimed, "Master of the Universe, the whole world is Yours, and Rabbah b. Nahmani, too, is Yours. You are [beloved of] Rabbah and Rabbah is Yours; why do You destroy the world on his account?!" Immediately, the storm subsided.[40]

The merchant questions the logic and justice of God expressing Divine rage and sorrow by casting a storm upon the world. After all, the fate of Rabbah b. Nahmani is in God's hands.

Effective challenges of Divine justice, without disparaging commentary or negative results, also occur within Talmudic passages of Biblical exegesis. Although the Bible says that the Ninevites effect Divine forgiveness with repentance, the Talmud suggests that the Ninevites do so by threatening to have no mercy on their animals if God has no mercy on them.[41] They stand up, balanced on the edge of the abyss, and force their way

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[39] *Baba Metzia* 59b.

[40] *Baba Metzia* 86a.

[41] *Taanit* 16a.

into the interior of God's will.

The Sages even conceive that God expects Israel's leaders to intervene on her behalf. They are obliged to argue for justice and for mercy, to challenge Divine judgement and to change God's mind. If they do not, God chastises, manipulates and instructs until the desired end is accomplished.

לעתיד לבא יאמר לו הקב"ה
לאברהם בניך חטאו לי אמר לפניו רבש"ע
ימרו על קדושת שבך אמר אימר ליה ליעקב
דהוה ליה צער גידול בנים אפשר דבעי
רחמי עלייהו אמר ליה בניך חטאו אמר
לפניו רבש"ע ימרו על קדושת שבך אמר
לא בסבי טעמא ולא בדרדקי עצה אמר לו
ליצחק בניך חטאו לי אמר לפניו רבש"ע
בני ולא בניך בשעה שהקדימו לפניך נעשה
לנשמע קראת להם °בני בכורי עכשיו בני
ולא בניך ועוד כמה חטאו כמה שנותיו
של אדם שבעים שנה דל עשרין דלא ענשת
עלייהו פשו להו הכשין דל כ"ה דלילותא
פשו להו כ"ה דל תרתי סרי ופלגא דצלויי
ומיכל ודבית הכסא פשו להו תרתי סרי
ופלגא אם אתה סובל את כולם מוטב ואם
לאו פלגא עלי ופלגא עליך ואת"ל כולם
עלי הא קריבית נפשי קמך

In the time to come the Holy One blessed be He will say to Abraham, "Your children have sinned against Me." He shall answer, "Master of the Universe, let them be wiped out for the sanctification of Your name."

Then God will say, "I will tell Jacob, who experienced the travail of bringing up children; perhaps he will ask mercy for them." So God said to Jacob, "Your children have sinned." Yet Jacob, too, responded, "Master of the Universe, let them be wiped out for the sanctification of Your name." God exclaimed, "There is no reason in old men, and no sage counsel in their children!"

Then God will say to Isaac, "Your children have sinned against Me." But Isaac will answer, "Master of the Universe, are they my children and not Your children?! When they stated first `we will do' and then `we will listen' to You, You called them `Israel My child, My firstborn' (Ex. 4:22); now they are my children and not Your children?!

> "Moreover, how much have they sinned? How many are the years of man -- seventy? Subtract twenty, for which You do not punish, and there remain fifty. Subtract twenty-five which are the nights [humanity is sleeping, not sinning], and there remain twenty-five. Subtract twelve and one-half for prayer, eating, and nature's calls, and there remain only twelve and one-half years. If You will bear all, it is well; if not, half be on me and half on You. And if You say it must all be on me, did I not offer myself up to You as a sacrifice? [Surely this is sufficient to bear these sins!]"[42]

God desires one who will challenge the strict measure of justice and demand faithfulness, forbearance from the Almighty. Mercy is, after all, one of God's announced attributes.[43] Isaac's answer is the response God seeks, and the other two patriarchs' failure is an obvious disappointment. God has a similar problem with Hosea:

> אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא להושע בניך חטאו והוה
> לו לומר בניך הם בני תינוניך הם בני אברהם יצחק ויעקב גדגל רחמיך עליהן
> לא דיו שלא אמר כך אלא אמר לפניו רבש"ע כל העולם שלך הוא העבירם
> באיזה אתרת אמר תקב"ה מה אעשה לזקן זה איכר לו לך וקח אשה זונה והוליד
> לך בנים זונים ואחר כך אומר לו שלחה מעל פניך אם הוא יכול לשלוח אף
> אני אשלח את ישראל

> The Holy One blessed be He said to Hosea, "Your children have sinned," to which he should have replied, "They are Your children, they are the children of Your favored ones, they are the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; extend Your mercy to them." It is not enough that he did not say this, but he said, "Master of the Universe, the whole world is Yours; exchange them for another nation."
>
> Said the Holy One blessed be He, "What shall I do with this old man? I will tell him to go and marry a harlot and father children of harlotry. Then I will order him to send her away. If he will be able to send her away, so will I, too, send

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[42] *Shabbat* 89b.

[43] See also Moses' argument based on this point: above, pp. 20-1.

Israel away."[44]

Hosea is loathe to send his wife away, and God reveals the parable to him:

> א"ל הקב"ה ומה אתה שאשתך זונה ובניך [בני] זנונים
> ואין אתה יודע אם שלך הן אם של אחרים הן כך ישראל שהן בני בני
> ברוני בני אברהם יצחק ויעקב...
> ואתה אמרת העבירם באומה אחרת
> כיון שידע שחטא עמד לבקש רחמים על עצמו אמר לו הקב"ה עד שאתה
> מבקש רחמים על עצמך בקש רחמים על ישראל שגזרתי עליהם שלש
> גזירות בעבורך עמד ובקש רחמים ובטל גזירה והתחיל לברכן

> ...Said the Holy One blessed be He, "Just as you, whose wife is a harlot and your children are the children of harlotry, and you do not even know whether they are yours or belong to others, [cannot cast them out]; so, too, Israel who are My children, the children of My tried ones, the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob [I cannot cast them out].... Yet you say to exchange them for a different people!"
>
> As soon as Hosea perceived that he had sinned, he arose to plead mercy for himself. Said the Holy One blessed be He, "Instead of requesting mercy for yourself, plead mercy for Israel, against whom I have decreed three decrees because of you." Immediately, he arose and begged for mercy, and God annulled the decrees and began to bless them.[45]

What might seem a pious response is deemed foolish and impertinent by God, more so than the bold challenges. By imagining that God desires to be questioned, the Rabbis express their fundamental assumption that God <u>is</u> ultimately just. God wants to be fair, God wants to

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[44] *Pesahim* 87a. This *aggadah* helps to explain the whole episode with the harlot in the book of Hosea. The command to marry her is not a meaningless burden; by living with her faithlessness, the prophet learns a vital lesson.

[45] *Pesahim* 87b. In addition, *Berakhot* 32a (suggesting many challenges to Divine justice that Moses makes) includes a teaching by R. Eleazar which could be understood to be God prompting Moses to intercede.

forgive. Similarly, Divine justice and benevolence are affirmed when God accedes to humanity's intervention. It seems plausible, in some instances, that God is simply testing Israel's leaders to determine their commitment to the people, or their vision of a Divinely ordained moral order. Nevertheless, this is clearly not the point in many of the *aggadot* -- the sun and moon, Zion, Hannah, Honi, Benjamin the Righteous, and Rabban Gamaliel -- these and others hurl their words against Heaven without an invitation from the Divine Host. Pushed to the edge of despair, yet standing well within the circle of faith, they demand of God what they have come to expect: justice and mercy woven together in a Divine tapestry.

CHAPTER THREE

CHALLENGES TO DIVINE POWER

Though it may be possible to explain many of the passages so they do not pose fundamental problems for Rabbinic theological principles, such rationalization risks denigrating the tremendous artistry and power of the *aggadot*. Yet a literal reading implies that God is somehow restricted until people act. God needs an intercessor to awaken Divine mercy, or to instruct which path in the landscape of choices is truly just. This is problematic, for it seems to limit God's omniscience and omnipotence. Furthermore, the notion that humanity could change God's mind at all, may compromise God's power. In order to preserve the value of prayer, with or without *hutzpa*, the Rabbis also define a God who is malleable. Righteous human beings are given general license to alter God's decisions:

°אמר אלהי ישראל לי דבר צור ישראל מושל באדם צדיק מושל יראת אלהים מאי קאמר
א"ר אבהו ה"ק אמר אלהי ישראל לי דבר צור ישראל אני מושל באדם מי מושל בי צדיק שאני *גוזר
גזרה ומבטלה

> "The God of Israel said, the Rock of Israel spoke to me: Ruler over man shall be the righteous, he that rules through the fear of God" (II Sam. 23:3). What does this mean? R. Abbahu said: It means, the God of Israel said: To me spoke the Rock of Israel -- I rule man, who rules Me? It is the righteous, for I make a decree and he may annul it.[1]

In another passage, R. Eleazar says that the prayers of the righteous turn the mind of the Holy One blessed be He from the attribute of harshness to that of mercy, just as

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[1] *Moed Katan* 16b. The parallel structure of the verse and its word order lead R. Abbahu to understand there are two rulers: one over man and one over God.

a pitchfork turns corn from one place to another.[2] According to one interpretation, this is what happened in Abraham's dialogue with the Almighty, after pleading the case of his descendants:

> ר' יוחייא בר' חנינא האי לקול המולה גדולה
> ... אלא אמר לו הקב"ה לאברהם קולך שמעתי ואמלתי עליהם
> אני אמרתי ישתעבדו בארבע מלכיות כל אחת ואחת בשיעור ארבע
> מלכיות השתא כל חדא וחדא מאי דפסיק לה. ואיבא דאמרי אני אמרתי
> בזה אחר זה עכשיו בבת אחת

> R. Hiyya b. Hinena [interpreted thus]: Why does the verse read "Because of the noise of the great tumult" (Jer. 11:16)?... The Holy One blessed be He said to Abraham, "I heard your voice and will have compassion[3] on them. I had said that they would be subjected to four successive empires, each one to endure as long as four together; now each one will end in its natural time.
>
> There are those who say [that God said] this: I had intended that they would be subjected to the four Empires in succession, but now it will be concurrently.[4]

Potentially, God becomes a pawn between forces supplicating for mercy and those demanding justice.

This is not the only way in which the Rabbis seem to circumscribe God's power. Without necessarily engaging in impertinent dialogue with the Almighty, they challenge God. *Hutzpa k'lapei shamaya* is conveyed through ideas -- conceptions and images of God preserved in Judaism's sacred literature.

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[2] *Sukkah* 14a.

[3] Connecting *hemlah* [compassion] to *hamulah* [tumult].

[4] *Menahot* 53b, see above p. 33.

I. The Shifting Limits of Challenge

The Talmud acknowledges that apparent compromises of God's attributes are problematic. As was noted in challenging God's justice, the text at times defends against the attack, accuses the attacker, or debates the validity of such an impertinent approach. The Rabbis seek to limit the damage when they are led to make surprising conclusions about God, Torah or other fundamental aspects of Jewish theology. One means is the attempt to restrict such conclusions to those evident in Biblical verses, as in the following:

אמר לפניו רבש"ע שטחי בכל העולם ולא
מצאתי כעבדך אברהם שאמרת לו °קום התהלך
בארץ לארכה ולרחבה כי לך אתננה ») ובשעה שבקש לקבור שרה לא מצא מקום לקוברה ולא
הרהר אחר מדותיך ויאמר ה' אל השטן הישמת לבך אל עבדי איוב כי אין כמוהו בארץ וגו'
ועודנו מחזיק בתומתו וחסיתני בו לבלעו חנם אמר רבי יוחנן אלמלא מקרא כתוב אי אפשר לאומרו
כאדם שמסיתין אותו וניסת

> [Satan] said, "Master of the Universe, I have traversed the whole earth, and have found no one like Your servant Abraham. For You said to him, `Arise, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I will give it to you' (Gen. 13:17). Yet when he sought to bury Sarah, he had no place in which to bury her; still, he did not question Your attributes."
>
> "Then the Lord said unto Satan, `Have you considered my servant Job, for there is none like him in the earth...and he still holds fast his integrity, although you moved Me against him to destroy him without cause'" (Job 2:3).
>
> Said R. Yohanan: Were it not expressly stated in the Scripture, we would not dare to say it. [God is made to appear] like a man who allows himself to be persuaded against his will.[5]

The phrase, "Were it not expressly stated in Scripture,

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[5] *Baba Batra* 16a. The passage later attempts to demonstrate how Job actually did deserve the punishment.

we would not dare say it," often accompanies Biblical exegesis that seems to contradict a theological assumption of the Rabbis, such as the startling notion that God can be goaded, persuaded to do something patently unfair, against God's own moral order and better judgement. Scripture testifies: God admits to destroying Job without cause.

The irony of this approach is that, while it seems to be limiting the context for such statements, the *aggadah* actually comes to expand upon the Biblical text. Because the Rabbis view the *tanakh* as a unit, hermeneutics demand enlarging. Here, the juxtaposition of Abraham and Job causes the reader to wonder about God's motivation in the former case as well. With an appreciation of the paradoxical nature of their endeavor, the Rabbis ask: How can Scripture say such a thing even once, and, in so asking, we say it again.

The Rabbinic reading of Scripture creates other theological tensions as well. When the Attribute of Justice convinces God to slay the righteous with the wicked, for instance, the quoted verse has to be reformulated -- *mikdashi* as *m'kuddashai* -- in order to support the interpretation.[6] The Attribute of Justice again persuades God to be less gracious: originally, the Almighty intends to make Hezekiah the messiah, but

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[6] *Shabbat* 55a, see above p. 29.

Justice argues that he is unworthy -- not having sung enough psalms. This *midrash* develops from a single letter of Isaiah, a final *mem* in the middle of a word. After the Attribute of Justice speaks, God's mind is closed (like the *mem*) regarding the matter.[7] If this is, indeed, eisigesis rather than exegesis, the Biblical verse is not truly a prerequisite for making bold suggestions about God's nature. The Rabbis **choose** to read the text in certain ways. In addition, the tales of Rabbis changing God's mind by boldly speaking out may have Biblical models, but are generally without explicit Scriptural support.

The ability to change Divine decrees through argument[8] implies uncertainty in God's mind, or a failure to properly consider all the factors. The Rabbis, as a general rule, want to stop short of directly questioning God's omniscience. *Berakhot* 3b specifically insists that there can be no uncertainty in God's mind. Similarly, a debate between Rabbis Abiatar and Yonatan regarding a concubine raises and dismisses the possibility:

> ואשכחיה ר' אביתר לאליהו א"ל כאי קא עביד הקב"ה א"ל עסיק בפילגש בגבעה ומאי קאמר אמר ליה אביתר בני כך הוא אומר יונתן בני כך הוא אומר א"ל ח"ן *ומי איכא ספיקא קמי שמיא א"ל אלו ואלו *דברי אלהים חיים הן.

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[7] *Sanhedrin* 94a.

[8] Versus through repentance, a less problematic means of influence within Jewish theology. Most negative decrees carry with them, as it were, an implicit condition that repentance may annul them.

R. Abiatar came across Elijah and said to him, "What is the Holy One blessed be He doing?" Elijah answered, "He is busy discussing the question of the concubine in Gibea."

"What does He say?"

Elijah quoted, "My son Abiatar says one thing, and My son Yonatan says another."

R. Abiatar said, "God forbid! Can there possibly be doubt in the mind of the Heavenly One?" Elijah answered, "Both are the words of the living God."[9]

The complex idea that two conflicting views may both be legitimate resolves not only the dispute between Yonatan and Abiatar, but also the possibility of doubt in God's mind. God can entertain the Rabbinic disputes in their entirety, without summarily declaring the "correct" answer, because all sides seek to expound upon the holy writ through valid means. It is not vacillation; rather, it is validation of Talmudic argument.

Rabbinic exegesis generally seeks to support Divine omnipotence as well. "Everything is in the hands of Heaven save for the fear of Heaven"[10] is a standard formulation. The report of the spies sent out to scout the promised land (Num. 13) is recounted as an opportunity to affirm that Divine power.

והאנשים אשר עלו
עמו אמרו לא נוכל וגו' אמר *רבי חנינא בר
פפא דבר גדול דברו מרגלים באותה שעה
כי חזק הוא ממנו *אל תקרי ממנו אלא ממנו
כביכול אפילו בעל הבית אינו יכול להוציא
כליו מישם

"But the men that went up with him said, 'We will not be able,'" etc. (Num. 13:31). Said R.

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[9] *Gittin* 6b.

[10] *Berakhot* 33b.

> Hanina b. Papa, "A grievous statement did the spies make at that moment; that is, `For they are stronger than we [*mi-meinu*].' Read not `than we,' but `than He' [*m'menu*] -- as if even the master of the house cannot remove his belongings from there.[11]

Their grievous statement [*d'var gadol*, literally "a great thing"] could be translated: a matter of great import. By suggesting that Israel cannot triumph over the Canaanites, it is not on Israel's power alone that they cast doubt. They draw into question God's omnipotence or commitment to intervene on behalf of the people -- significant theological issues.

Using a word play to emphasize these ultimate questions, the Talmudic passage confirms God's omnipotence. God, the Master of the House, certainly can remove the Canaanites from the land. The spies' statement borders on the heretical, and they are punished for their insolence. For believing their conclusion that Israel will be unable to take the land, the people are condemned to wander in the wilderness for forty years.

Still, it should be noted that, despite the answers and affirmations offered, the same questions emerge again and again. When R. Hanina b. Papa points to a contradiction between two verses of Scripture which implies a Biblical basis for some limiting of Divine omnipotence, an ingenious resolution is found:

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[11] *Sotah* 35a. Similarly, *Menahot* 53b, *Arakhin* 15a.

°שדי לא מצאנוהו שגיא כח
וכתיב °גדול אדונינו ורב כח וכתיב °ימינך ה' נאדרי בכח לא קשיא כאן
בשעת הדין כאן בשעת מלחמה

"As to the Almighty, we do not find Him excellent in power" (Job 37:23). Yet it says, "Great is our Lord and of abundant power" (Ps. 147:5), and "Your right hand becomes glorious in power" (Ex. 15:6). There is actually no contradiction here; the former refers to the time of judgement and the latter refers to a time of war.

Rashi notes that, was God to exercise full power during judgement, the entire world would be destroyed. Instead, God tempers justice with mercy.[12] The Rabbis conclude God limits the Divine Self voluntarily. Such limiting does not actually detract from omnipotence, for God could always relax these Self-imposed restrictions. Thus, the idea of God's Self-limitation is not uncommon:

דאמר רבי יהושע
בן לוי למה נקרא שמן אנשי כנסת הגדולה שהחזירו עטרה ליושנה אתא
משה אמר °האל הגדול הגבור והנורא אתא ירמיה ואמר נכרים *) מקרקרין
בהיכלו איה נוראותיו לא אמר נורא אתא דניאל אמר נכרים משתעבדים
בבניו איה גבורותיו לא אמר גבור אתו אינהו ואמרו אדרבה זו היא
(ו) גבורת גבורתו שכובש את (ו)*יצרו שנותן ארך אפים לרשעים ואלו הן
נוראותיו שאלמלא מוראו של הקב"ה היאך אומה אחת יכולה להתקיים
בין האומות ורבנן היכי עבדי הכי ועקרי תקנתא דתקון משה אמר רבי
אלעזר מתוך שיודעין בהקב"ה שאמתי הוא לפיכך לא כיזבו בו:

R. Joshua b. Levi said: Why were they called men of the Great Assembly? Because they restored the Crown to its ancient [completeness]. Moses had come and said, "The great God, the mighty and the awesome" (Deut. 10:17). Then Jeremiah came and said, "Aliens are destroying His Temple. Where, then, are His awesome deeds?" Thus he omitted "awesome" (Jer. 32:18). Daniel came and said, "Aliens are enslaving His sons. Where are His mighty deeds?" Hence he omitted "mighty" (Dan. 9:4). But [the men of the Great Assembly] came and said: "On the contrary! This is His true might, that He suppresses His inclination, that He extends long-suffering to the wicked. These are His awesome deeds, for otherwise how could one people exist

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[12] *Avodah Zarah* 4a.

> among the nations of the world?
>
> The Rabbis asked: How could they [Jeremiah and Daniel] abolish something established by Moses? R. Eleazar said: Since they knew that the Holy One blessed be He insists on truth, they would not falsely flatter Him.[13]

In their litanies of Divine attributes, Jeremiah and Daniel omit key words that Moses included. In their experience, God does not appear to be mighty and awesome. Although the men of the Great Assembly reinterpret God's restrained behavior to be a sign of Divine might, thereby restoring "the crown to its ancient completeness," Jeremiah and Daniel are justified in omitting these attributes. God's own standard for truth demands it. The historical circumstances of their time confirm the experience, if not the reality, of the diminution of God's power.[14] Even if they were to interpret God's actions as do the Rabbis, they might still cry out like Isaiah and Habakkuk, demanding to know how God can hold back in the face of such suffering and injustice.

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[13] *Yoma* 69b. Other examples include: God allows Titus to lay waste to Jerusalem, and is silent. "'Who is like You, mighty in Self-restraint, that You heard the blaspheming and insults of that wicked man and keep silent.' In the school of R. Ishmael it was taught: Who is like You among the gods (*elim*) -- who is like You among the dumb ones (*illemim*)." Rather than attacking such evil directly, God sends the smallest of God's creatures, a gnat, to plague him (*Gittin* 56b). God restrains Divine knowledge as well, taking no notice of the secret intentions of humanity in judgement, only actions (*Kiddushin* 40a).

[14] Jakob J. Petuchowski, Theology and Poetry (Boston, 1978), 72-3.

The text subtly manages to affirm both the limitation of God's power and the limitations on such radical theology.

II. Challenges Stand

A. Does God Decide?

The experience of God's limitations is not always mitigated by explicit theological rationalizations. There are Talmudic passages that neither attack, nor attempt to resolve their implication that God is not omniscient or omnipotent. For example:

קא מיפלגי
במתיבתא דרקיעא "אם *בהרת קודמת לשיער לבן טמא ואם שיער לבן קודם
לבהרת טהור ספק הקב"ה אומר טהור ובולהו מתיבתא דרקיעא אמרי טמא
ואמרי מאן נוכח נוכח רבה בר נחמני דאמר רבה בר נחמני אני יחיד בנגעים
אני יחיד באהלות

> They were debating in the Heavenly Academy [about the *halakha* of leprosy]: If the bright spot precedes the white hair, the man is defiled. If the white hair precedes the bright spot, the man is clean. If [the order of appearance] is in doubt, the Holy One blessed be He said that the man is clean. The rest of the Heavenly Academy said that the man is defiled. They asked, "Who shall decide? -- Rabbah b. Nahmani, who said, 'I am the singular authority regarding leprosy; I am the singular authority regarding tents.'"[15]

A human being may have more complete knowledge than God -- on a point of God's law! The claiming of such mastery, as well as the successful and unsuccessful efforts to change God's mind, can be understood as

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[15] *Baba Metzia* 86a. A more typical process can be found on 85a-b, in which the Sages cannot decide, so God interprets a verse for them, declaring the correct answer.

challenges to Divine authority. Obeisance is, at least in part, predicated on the belief that God knows all, and therefore God knows best. In any event, submission to God's will is assumed in the Rabbinic world. Challenging this tenet of faith and behavior would be unspeakably bold. Nevertheless, there is a famous passage in which God's authority is directly denied (even though God knows the "right answer"), and God seems to approve.

תנו רבנן *חתכו חוליות ונתן חול ביניהן לטהר ר"א מטמא וחכמים מטהרין
וזה הוא תנור של עכנאי...

באותו היום השיב רבי
אליעזר כל תשובות שבעולם ולא קיבלו
הימנו אמר להם אם הלכה כמותי חרוב זה
יוכיח נעקר חרוב ממקומו מאה אמה ואמרי
לה ארבע מאות אמה אמרו לו אין מביאין
ראיה מן החרוב חזר ואמר להם אם הלכה
כמותי אמת המים יוכיחו חזרו אמת המים
לאחוריהם אמרו לו אין מביאין ראיה מאמת
המים חזר ואמר להם אם הלכה כמותי
כותלי בית המדרש יוכיחו הטו כותלי
בית המדרש ליפול גער בהם רבי יהושע
אמר להם אם תלמידי חכמים מנצחים זה
את זה בהלכה אתם מה טיבכם לא נפלו
מפני כבודו של רבי יהושע ולא זקפו מפני
כבודו של ר"א ועדיין מטין ועומדין חזר
ואמר להם אם הלכה כמותי מן השמים
יוכיחו יצאתה בת קול ואמרה מה לכם אצל
ר"א שהלכה כמותו בכ"מ עמד רבי יהושע
על רגליו ואמר °לא בשמים היא מאי לא
בשמים היא אמר רבי ירמיה שכבר נתנה
תורה מהר סיני *אין אנו משגיחין בבת קול
שכבר כתבת בהר סיני בתורה °אחרי רבים
להטות אשכחיה רבי נתן לאליהו א"ל מאי
עביד קוב"ה בההיא שעתא א"ל קא חייך
ואמר נצחוני בני נצחוני בני

We learned elsewhere: If he cut it into separate tiles, placing sand between each tile, R. Eliezer declared it clean, and the Sages declared it unclean -- this was the oven of Aknai....

On that day, R. Eliezer brought forward every imaginable argument, but they did not accept them. He said to them, "If the *halakha* agrees with me, let

this carob tree prove it." The carob tree was torn one hundred cubits out of its place; others insist it was four hundred cubits.

"No proof can be brought from a carob tree," they said. So he responded, "If the *halakha* agrees with me, let the stream of water prove it!" The stream of water flowed backwards.

"No proof can be brought from a stream of water," they insisted. Again, he said, "If the *halakha* agrees with me, let the walls of the house of study prove it." The walls began to fall, but R. Joshua rebuked them saying, "When scholars are engaged in a dispute regarding *halakha*, what right do you have to interfere?" Thus, in honor of R. Joshua, they did not fall; nor did they return upright, in honor of R. Eliezer -- and they are still standing so inclined.

He said to the Sages, "If the *halakha* agrees with me, let it be proved from Heaven!" A Heavenly Voice cried out, "Why do you dispute with R. Eliezer, seeing that in all matters the *halakha* agrees with him?"

R. Joshua stood up and exclaimed, "It is not in Heaven" (Deut. 30:12). What does, "It is not in Heaven" mean? R. Jeremiah interpreted: Since the Torah has already been given at Mount Sinai, we pay no attention to a Heavenly Voice, for You have long ago written in the Torah at Mount Sinai, "After the majority one must incline" (Ex. 23:2).

R. Nathan met Elijah and asked him, "What did the Holy One blessed be He do in that hour?" "He laughed," came the reply, "and said, `My sons have defeated Me, My sons have defeated Me.'"

Ultimately, the Rabbis vote to ban R. Eliezer, a sentence that lasts until his death.[16] This is his "reward" for insisting on the correct interpretation of God's law. Because the Rabbis must maintain a system of interpretation that works even without Divine

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[16] *Baba Metzia* 59b. It is on this occasion that the storm which threatens to kill R. Gamaliel is mentioned, presumably because he was in charge of the indictment. God obviously is not pleased with the pain caused such a prized scholar as R. Eliezer, but accepts the excuse that R. Gamaliel was acting to preserve God's honor.

intervention, they maintain their principle of majority rule, even above God's own ruling.

Elijah is brought, even more than most Biblical heroes, to argue Israel's case before God, or to bear messages from Heaven. His revolutionary ministry and miraculous ascent to heaven in a chariot of fire make Elijah a legendary figure, even in Biblical times. Malachi predicts his return before the "Day of the Lord" to "turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the hearts of children to their parents" (Mal. 3:23-4). Picking up on this point, *aggadah* associates Elijah with the messianic age. In the meantime, he is a great teacher, the bearer of good tidings, and the grand peacemaker -- especially between Israel and the Most High.

In the cited passage, he communicates God's delight with the Talmudic process. So significant is this approval, the worlds of law and lore begin to merge. *Aggadah* has *halakhic* implications; the statement that we do not listen to a Heavenly Voice is repeated five times in the Babylonian Talmud.[17] Although it is always cited

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[17] *Berakhot* 52a, *Eruvin* 7a, *Hullin* 44a, *Pesahim* 114a, and *Yevamot* 14a. Much scholarly consideration has been given to the precise status of the *bat kol*. It is, of course, an intriguing question, especially because the *bat kol* seems to be authoritative in the Hillel-Shammai dispute (1st generation *tannaim*, 70-90 C.E.), but not in R. Eliezer's time (2nd generation *tannaim*, 90+ C.E.). There is some speculation that it is not from God at all; the *bat kol*'s "function as a touchstone of divine consent

in the name of R. Joshua, it is brought to bear on other disputes. It is not clear, however, what the Rabbis would do if they perceived God does not approve of their *hutzpa*. Would they expect a forceful Divine reaction? Is the God who needs an intercessor to awaken Divine mercy, the God whose power is repeatedly portrayed as limited in certain respects, able to control such situations? Or is the Almighty, at times, powerless to intervene in history?

B. Inability to Intervene in History

אמר ריש לקיש
מעשה באשה אחת וצפנת בת פניאל שבה [צפנת שהבל צופין ביופיה בת פניאל בתו של כהן גדול ששימש לפני ולפנים] שנתעלל בה שבאי כל הלילה למחר הלבישה שבעה חלוקים והוציאה למוכרה בא אדם אחד שהיה מכוער ביותר אמר לו הראני את יופיה אמר לו ריקא אם אתה רוצה ליקח קח שאין כיופיה בכל העולם כולו אמר לו אף על פי כן הפשיטה ששה חלוקים ושביעי קרעתה ונתפלשה באפר אמרה לפניו רבונו של עולם אם עלינו לא חמת על קדושת שמך הגבור למה לא תחום ועליה קונן ירמיה °בת עמי חגרי שק והתפלשי באפר אבל יחיד עשי לך מספד תמרורים כי פתאם יבא השודד עלינו עליך לא נאמר אלא עלינו כביכול עלי ועליך בא שודד

> Resh Lakish said: It is related of a certain woman named Tzafenat b. Peniel...that her captor abused her a whole night. In the morning he put seven wraps around her and took her out to sell her. A certain man who was exceptionally ugly came and said, "Show me her beauty." "Fool," the other responded, "if you want to buy her, buy -- for there is no other so beautiful in all the world."
>
> "Nonetheless, [show her to me]." He took six wraps off her, and she herself tore off the seventh and rolled in the dust, crying, "Master of the Universe, if You have no pity on us, why have You no pity on the sanctity of Your mighty name?!" For her Jeremiah utters lamentation, saying, "O daughter of

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was clearly never beyond question." (Robert L. Platzner, "Reflections on the *Bat Kol*," Studia Mystica 10:2 (1987): 57.) This *aggadah*, however, clearly intends that the Heavenly Voice be understood precisely as such a touchstone. God says "My children have defeated Me" by rebutting the *bat kol*'s authority.

> My people, gird yourself with sackcloth and wallow in ashes; mourn as for an only child, wail bitterly, for the spoiler shall suddenly come upon us" (Jer. 6:26).
>
> It does not say "upon you" but "upon us." The spoiler is come, if one may say so, upon Me and upon you.[18]

Tzafenat's plea before God is similar to the model discussed above, a plea for Divine justice or intervention of some sort. There is no record, however, that God responds by acting as she requests, nor that she is chastised for such presumptuousness. Rather, the *aggadah* uses a prophetic text to affirm her experience, echo her cry; it communicates the startling notion that, perhaps, there is nothing God can do. The spoiler overtakes God as well. It is so shocking that the Rabbis use the apologetic *kiv'yakhol* --if one may say so -- to soften the impact.

The term *kiv'yakhol* is worthy of discussion, because its interpretation affects our understanding of the intent of this *aggadah*, and perhaps yields clues to other passages as well. In the standard Talmudic dictionary, it is translated, "as though it were possible, as it were," used with an allegorical or anthropomorphic reference to God.[19] A. Marmorstein concludes, after surveying a broad range of Rabbinic material, that it is

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[18] *Gittin* 58a.

[19] Marcus Jastrow, Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Bavli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature (New York, 1971), 577.

used so freely only in later literature, qualifying gross anthropomorphisms or anthropopathisms.[20] He maintains that the Talmud generally uses the term *kiv'yakhol* to indicate that the Bible or some parallel support conveys the same thought. In the instance at hand, there is a Biblical prooftext. The presence of the verse increases the seriousness with which the idea is offered.

In a comment elsewhere, Rashi explains the term, "Even though it seems unreasonable to say so, we are compelled to express it thus."[21] To some extent, this captures the ambiguous nature of the original term. Ultimately, it is "possible to say," even if its implications remain enigmatic. Although *kiv'yakhol* may simply signal a human way of speaking, it represents a truth, nonetheless, which cannot be humanly transcended.[22] It may signal *hutspa*, but does not necessarily mitigate its power.

In other passages, there is no *kiv'yakhol*, no ambiguity in the ideas expressed. R. Samuel b. Nahmani interprets the verse, "But if you will not hear it, My soul will weep in secret for the pride" (Jer. 13:17), imagining God weeps because the glory of the Kingdom of

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[20] A. Marmorstein, The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God. 2 vols. (1927; reprint edn., New York, 1968), 2:131.

[21] Rashi to *Yoma* 3b.

[22] Emil Fackenheim, God's Presence in History, (New York, 1970), 24.

Heaven is crushed.[23] Is God powerless to stop it? Can God not revoke the decrees that led to such destruction?

The following passage suggests God would like to do just that:

> אמר רב חנא בר אחא אמרי בי רב ארבעה מתחרט עליהן הקב"ה שבראם ואלו הן גלות כשדים וישמעאלים ויצר הרע

> R. Hana b. Aha stated: It was said in the school of Rav that there are four things which the Holy One blessed be He regrets creating. They are the exile, the Chaldeans, the Ishmaelites, and the evil inclination.[24]

God's regret concerning the exile is expressed in many anthropopathic *aggadot* in which God cries (thereby causing earthquakes)[25], or roars in despair and pity at each of the night watches,[26] etc. Yet the exile endures.

Although the prayers of the righteous may be able to change God's decisions, the Almighty does not always seem to have such Self-control. God cannot change the amount of rain ordained for a given year, for instance, even if the behavior of the people changes so they deserve more or less. The rain has not already fallen, the clouds have not gathered, but the decree has gone out.[27] The parallel implication can be drawn that, because the exile

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[23] *Hagigah* 5b, linking *gavah* [pride] to *ga'avah* [glory].

[24] *Sukkah* 52b.

[25] *Berakhot* 59a. This notion, proposed by a necromancer, is disputed by R. Kattina.

[26] *Berakhot* 3a.

[27] *Rosh Hashanah* 17b. God compensates, by carefully directing the rain.

has been created, there is no avoiding it, even if God wants to.

When Moses is hurling words against Heaven, it is said that he grabs God and will not let go until the people are forgiven.[28] God may appreciate Moses' desperate longing for reconciliation, but the notion that Moses can overpower God in order to effect it is bewildering. It is not simple anthropomorphism. Not only is there theoretically something to grab onto, but this physical manifestation is beaten by a mere mortal. This God is not all-powerful.

C. Power of Prayer Vs. Power of God

Also, the passage says that Moses wearies God with his intercessory prayers. Certainly an omnipotent being should not be worn down by words! The opposite teaching is just as surprising: Raba says in the name of R. Isaac that the Holy One blessed be He told Moses that he "revived God" with his words. Surely an omnipotent being does not need reviving, either.

The Levitic practice of exclaiming daily, "Awake -- why do You sleep, O Lord?" (Ps. 44:24, see above p.

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[28] *Berakhot* 32a, see above p. 44. The parallel to Jacob's wrestling match is clear, but there (Gen. 32:25) Jacob wrestles with an *ish* (literally, "man"); here it is the Holy One blessed be He. A similar passage in the Palestinian Talmud (*Taanit* 4, 68c) tells of Moses and God engaging in a tug of war for the Ten Commandments which Moses wins.

10ff.) also indicates that God needs reviving. Alternatively, God is unconcerned or unaware. In either event, human intervention is needed, and the Talmud comments, "So long as Israel abides in trouble and the idolaters are in peace and comfort, the words `Awake, why do You sleep O Lord' should be uttered."[29]

The power of prayer is sufficient, it seems, not only to revive God, but to overpower the Divine will:

> אליהו הוה שכיח במתיבתא דרבי יומא
> חד ריש ירחא הוה ננה ליה ולא אתא א"ל מאי טעמא ננה ליה למר אמר
> ליה אדאוקימנא לאברהם ומשינא ידיה ומצלי ומגנינא ליה וכן ליצחק וכן
> ליעקב ולוקמינהו בהדי הדדי סברי הקפי ברחמי ומייתי ליה למשיח בלא
> זמניה א"ל ויש דוגמתן בעולם הזה אבר ליה איכא ר' חייא וכניו גזר רבי
> תעניתא ארתינהו *לר' חייא וכניו אמר משיב *הרוח ונשבה זיקא אמר
> מוריד הגשם ואתא מיטרא כי מטא למימר מחיה המתים רגש עלמא אמרי
> ברקיעא מאן גלי רזיא בעלמא אמרי אליהו אתיוהו לאליהו מחיוהו שתין פולסי
> דנורא אתא אידמי להו כדובא דנורא על ביניידו וטרדינהו

Elijah used to frequent Rabbi's academy. One day -- it was the new moon -- Elijah was delayed and failed to come. The next day Rabbi asked, "Why did you not come?" Elijah replied, "[I had to wait] until I awoke Abraham, washed his hands, and he prayed and I put him to rest again; likewise with Isaac and Jacob."

Rabbi asked, "But why not wake them all together?"

"I feared they would wax strong in prayer [together] and bring the Messiah before his time."

"Is there anyone like them to be found in this world?" Rabbi asked. Elijah replied, "There are R. Hiyya and his sons." Then Rabbi proclaimed a fast and had R. Hiyya and his sons [lead the congregation in prayer]. As he said, "He causes the wind to blow," a wind blew. As he said, "He causes the rain to fall," rain fell. When he was about to say, "He gives life to the dead," the universe trembled and in Heaven it was asked, "Who has revealed this secret to the world?"

"Elijah," came the reply. Elijah was therefore brought and smitten with sixty flaming lashes; he

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[29] *Sotah* 48a.

> then disguised himself as a fiery bear, came upon [the congregation], and scattered them.[30]

Elijah, the intercessor for humanity, reveals a Heavenly secret. The strong Promethean element in this *aggadah* suggests an interesting parallel. The secret of prayer is like the secret of fire. Once in the hands of certain individuals, it cannot be taken away and its power cannot be denied. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob may be able to force God's hand in history, to bring messiah before his time. R. Hiyya has power over nature and resurrection, the power to preempt the Divine prerogative. The notion that God cannot resist prayers, even if they are contrary to Divine will, is startling.

D. Divine Consultation and Deference to Other Authority

God's relationship to the rest of "heaven" is also surprising. According to R. Yohanan's teaching, "The Holy One blessed be He does nothing without consulting His Heavenly Court, as it is written, `The matter is by the decrees of the watchers, and the sentence by the word of the Holy Ones' (Dan. 4:14)."[31] This idea answers

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[30] *Baba Metzia* 85b.

[31] *Sanhedrin* 38b, 99b. In *Sanhedrin* 38b, God does consult the ministering angels regarding the decision to create humanity. The first two groups of angels, upon learning of the evil that humanity will perpetrate in the future, advise against it. God does not like this answer, and destroys them. The third group of angels admits, "The whole world is Yours, and whatever You wish

heretics who challenge the unity of God by quoting Biblical verses that use plural verbs for Divine actions. Yet the concept of discussions with the angels, or a *bet din* in heaven[32] seems to compromise the absolute authority of God. Here the issues of power and knowledge begin to blend. Does God ask for the angels' opinion because they alone know some vital fact, because their careful consideration can alleviate God's uncertainty, or because they have a power with which God must reckon? Since consultation does not necessarily imply deference, perhaps it is only a courtesy to the angels. God does defer, however, when the angels question the early death of Benjamin the righteous.[33] R. Akiba teaches that people liable for the punishment of *karet* (excommunication), if they repent, will be granted remission by the Heavenly Court.[34] One expects this is God's prerogative. Also, in passages such as *Baba Metzia* 86a, where there is a debate between God and the rest of the Heavenly Academy, God grants the Academy an equal

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to do in it, You will do." This sort of specious consultation is not much of a threat to God's omnipotence. (It does indicate, however, a failure to deal fairly with the angels, even if done on behalf of humanity.)

[32] For example, *Makkot* 13b-14a, *Shevuot* 21a.

[33] *Baba Batra* 11a, see above p. 52.

[34] *Makkot* 13b-14a.

voice. In the end, they submit to an earthly authority![35]

Even if one regards heavenly debates primarily as an instrument to announce the Divine will,[36] there are several instances in which the *bet din shel ma'aleh* defers to the earthly court. R. Joshua b. Levi states that three things were enacted by the earthly court, and the Heavenly Court submitted to their decision. He derives evidence for each example from Biblical texts.[37] It is also said that the Heavenly Court does not even assemble for judgement until the earthly court has sanctified the month.[38]

It is not clear, in many instances, whether God graciously grants a measure of respect to human authority, or requires their input. Rabbah b. Shila reports that Elijah told him God utters traditions in the name of all the Rabbis.[39] The verse, "And the Lord spoke to Moses face to face" (Ex. 33:11) is interpreted to mean

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[35] See above, p. 65.

[36] See, for instance, *Shevuot* 21a, in which the *bet din shel ma'aleh* and YHWH seem to be used interchangeably.

[37] *Makkot* 23b.

[38] *Rosh Hashanah* 8b.

[39] *Hagigah* 15b. -- Except for R. Meir, who learned Torah from Aher, a heretic. After Rabbah argues that R. Meir was discerning in his studies and accepted only true Torah, Elijah reports that he hears God citing traditions in Meir's name as well.

that God suggests that Moses and the Almighty will exchange views on the *halakha*.[40]

When humanity proclaims they no longer need Divine input, however, the challenge to authority is clear. The debate between R. Eliezer and the Rabbis, which ends with R. Joshua exclaiming that we no longer listen to a Heavenly Voice (and R. Eliezer is excommunicated, even though Heaven is on his side), demonstrates that humans do assert real authority (*Baba Metzia* 59b, see above pp. 68-9). It is based on the study of Torah, which is "not in Heaven;" the source of learning, truth, and power has come to earth.

E. Rabbinization of God

It is even suggested that God emulates this Rabbinic model, learning from Torah, as it were:

אמר רב יהודה אמר
רב שתים עשרה שעות הוי היום *שלש
הראשונות הקב"ה יושב ועוסק בתורה שניות
יושב ודן את כל העולם כולו כיון שרואה
שנתחייב עולם כליה עומד מכסא הדין
ויושב על כסא רחמים שלישיות *יושב וזן את כל העולם כולו[מקרני ראמים
עד ביצי כנים] רביעיות יושב ומשחק עם ליתן

> Rav Judah said in the name of Rav: The day consists of twelve hours. During the first three hours, the Holy One blessed be He is occupying Himself with Torah; during the second three, He sits in judgement on the whole world. When He sees that the world is so guilty as to deserve destruction, He transfers Himself from the seat of Justice to the seat of Mercy. During the third quarter, He is feeding the whole world.... During the fourth

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[40] *Berakhot* 63b. *Nasbir panim* [exchanging views] connects with *panim el panim* [face to face].

quarter, He is sporting with the leviathan.[41]

Is the Torah so rich with teachings that even its Creator needs daily study? This text also raises the idea of God's transfer from the seat of Justice to that of Mercy; another vision of this shift portrays the Almighty copying a different Rabbinic technique: prayer.

א"ר יתנן משום ר' יוסי מנין שהק"בה מתפלל
שנא' °והביאותים אל הר קדשי ושמחתים
בבית תפלתי תפלתם לא נאמר אלא תפלתי
מכאן שהק"בה מתפלל מאי מצלי אמר רב
זוטרא בר טוביא אמר רב יד"ר מלפני שיכבשו
רחמי את כעסי ויגלו רחמי על מדותי ואתנהג
עם בני במדת רחמים ואכנס להם °לפנים
משורת הדין

R. Yohanan says in the name of R. Yosi: How do we know that the Holy One blessed be He says prayers? Because it says, "Even them will I bring to My holy mountain and make them joyful in the house of My prayer" (Isa. 56:7). It is not said "their prayer," but "My prayer." Hence, the Holy One blessed be He says prayers. What does He pray? R. Zutra b. Tuvia said in the name of Rav: "May it be My will that My mercy suppress My anger, and that My mercy may prevail over My other attributes, so that I may deal with My children in the attribute of mercy and, on their behalf, stop short of the strict measure of justice."[42]

This clear limitation of God's power goes even further. The same passage mentions a private revelation in which God requests the blessing of a human being. God not only needs to pray in order to be merciful, but also needs to be "prayed for."

א"ר ישמעאל בן אלישע
פעם אחת נכנסתי להקטיר קטרת לפני ולפנים
וראיתי אכתריאל יה ה' צבאות שהוא יושב
על כסא רם ונשא ואמר לי ישמעאל בני

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41 *Avodah Zarah* 3b.

42 *Berakhot* 7a. "The house of My prayer" is generally rendered "My house of prayer."

ברבני אמרתי לו ידרס שיבבשו רחמיך את
כעסך ויגולו רחמיך על מדותיך ותתנהג עם
בניך במדת הרחמים ותכנס להם לפנים משורת
הדין ונענע לי בראשו

R. Ishmael b. Elisha said: I once entered into the innermost part [of the Sanctuary] to offer incense and saw *Akatriel Yah* (the crown of God), the Lord of Hosts, seated upon a high and exalted throne. He said to me, "Ishmael, my son, bless Me." I replied, "May it be Your will that Your mercy suppress Your anger, and that Your mercy prevail over Your other attributes, so that You may deal with Your children in the attribute of mercy and may, on their behalf, stop short of the strict measure of justice." And He nodded to me with His head.

Perhaps most surprising of all is the suggestion, in the *aggadah* below, that God needs to atone. Is it possible for God to sin, or to err? To whom is the sacrifice being offered?

רבי שמעון בן פזי רמי כתיב °ויעש
אלהים את שני המאורות הגדולים וכתיב
את המאור הגדול ואת המאור הקטן אמרה
ירח לפני הקב"ה רבש"ע אפשר לשני מלכים
שישתמשו בכתר אחד אמר לה לכי ומעטי
את עצמך אמרה לפניו רבש"ע ס תויאל
ואמרתי לפניך דבר הגן אמעיט את עצמי
אמר לה לכי ומשול ביום ובלילה אמרה ליה
מאי רבותיה *דשרגא בטיהרא מאי אהני ...
חזייה דלא קא מיתבא דעתה אמר הקב"ה הביאו
כפרה על שמיעטתי את הירח והיינו *דאמר ר"ש בן לקיש מה נשתנה שעיר
של ראש חדש שנאמר בו °לה' אמר הקב"ה שעיר זה יהא כפרה על שמיעטתי
את הירח

R. Simeon b. Pazzi pointed out a contradiction. It is written, "And God made the two great lights" (Gen. 1:16), and the verse continues, "the greater light... and the lesser light." The moon said unto the Holy One blessed be He, "Master of the Universe: Is it possible for two kings to use one crown?" He answered, "Go then and make yourself smaller."

"Master of the Universe! Because I have suggested that which is logical, must I then make myself smaller?"

"Go, and you will rule [one] by day and [the other] by night."

"But what value is this? Of what use is a lamp

> in broad daylight?"....
>
> Upon seeing that the moon would not be consoled, the Holy One blessed be He said, "Bring an atonement for Me for making the moon smaller." This is what was meant by Resh Lakish when he declared: How is the he-goat offered on the new moon different? -- It is written concerning [this one]: "unto the Lord" (Num. 28:15). The Holy One blessed be He said, "Let this he-goat be an atonement for Me for making the moon smaller.[43]

When Israel atones, they admit their mistaken judgement: "We are guilt-laden: We have been faithless, we have robbed, and we have spoken basely; we have committed iniquity, and caused unrighteousness...."[44] They admit their limited knowledge: "For the sin which we have committed before thee out of ignorance... for the sin which we have committed before thee wittingly or unwittingly... for the sin which we have committed before thee with confusion of mind."[45] They admit their negligible power:

> What are we? What is our life? What is our piety? What is our righteousness? What our helpfulness? What our strength? What our might? What shall we say before thee, O Lord our God and God of our fathers? Are not all the mighty men as nought before thee, the men of renown as though they had not been, the wise as if without knowledge, and the men of understanding as if without discernment?[46]

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[43] *Hullin* 60b. The words "unto the Lord" are not found in connection with sacrifices on other festive occasions.

[44] Confession, Service for the Day of Atonement as translated in Joseph Hertz, Daily Prayer Book (New York, 1963), 507.

[45] ibid., 911-9.

[46] Concluding service, ibid., 933.

Does God then admit to such limitation? Is it possible that there is any literal or historical meaning of God making atonement? Can Anson Laytner's ingenious suggestion that *aggadot* be read with both historical and homiletical intentions be applied in this case?

All of the passages, to varying degrees, have raised such doubts about heretofore assumed qualities of the Divine Being, that the question continually arises: how do we read these texts?

CHAPTER FOUR

HOMILY AND HISTORY:

Some Thoughts on Reading the Text

Traditional Judaism still affirms the theistic God who is all-knowing, all-powerful, all-good. Submission to Divine authority is assumed. In order to fit passages such as those cited above into this faith structure, some commentators suggest a homiletical explanation. The Rabbis wish to communicate certain ideas so earnestly, and to emphasize them so clearly, that they compromise certain basic assumptions in the process. To reassure people that God is just and righteousness has its reward, for instance, an *aggadah* develops which tells the story of Benjamin the Righteous miraculously recovering from illness (*Baba Batra* 11a, see above p. 52). The role of the angels who force God's hand could be a literary invention, to give voice to the principle involved -- not a compromise of Divine judgement and power.

To the extent that the *aggadot* reflect aspects of human experience, however, they are also history. Angelology is not foreign to Rabbinic Judaism, and the notion of an intercessor in Heaven has some precedent. The Rabbis may consider the story of Benjamin an actual chronicle. Was there an oral tradition about such a *tzaddik* who was close to death, but then recovered? Could he be a model for any number of good people whose lives seem guided by Divine providence? Faith in God's justice, mercy, and healing power is acknowledged even today as a great source of strength. All these

"historical" elements can be part of Benjamin's story.

Homily or history, many of the *aggadot*, like the Biblical model, evolve from a single question. It may be, as Harold Kushner says, the only question that really matters: Why do bad things happen to good people?[1] Why does God allow unwarranted suffering to exist? Other issues are involved and will be discussed, but the problem of theodicy lies at the heart of all the most famous God-wrestlers: Abraham, Jeremiah, Job. It is with this primary theological struggle that an effort to understand must begin.

> Only in Israel... does the question touch the very essence of God.... On the one hand, there was no evil principle; good and evil came from YHWH. On the other hand, Israelite religion tolerated no fault or blame in God. He was altogether good and just. When harsh reality challenged the conventional view of divine justice, concern for the honor of God violently disturbed the devout. They could not break out in insults or surrender to despair; they could only complain and question and go on seeking an answer.[2]

Indeed, it is possible to explore the phenomenon of *hutzpa k'lapei shamaya* as a record of these complaints, questions, and answers. Using the quest for theodicy as a framework, this chapter will discuss some of the motifs within the homiletical-historical spectrum. While concentrating on the *aggadot* already cited, some new

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[1] Kushner, Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People, (New York: Avon Books, 1981), 6.

[2] Yehezkel Kaufmann, The Religion of Israel, Moshe Greenberg, trans. (Chicago, 1960), 332-33.

material will help further the search for underlying theological questions and answers.

I. Traditional Theodicies

Many answers are forthcoming. Jim Sanders prefaces his study of suffering by listing eight categories of solutions evident in the Bible: retributive, disciplinary, revelational, probational, illusory or transitory, mysterious, eschatological, meaningless.[3] The Talmud, in turn, discusses these possibilities, offering different emphases, nuances and theories. Although not systematic, all of the most important ideas in connection with theodicy can be found in the Talmud. Many of them emerge from the texts presented above, seeking a theological foundation for the Jewish experience. Thus, the suffering of the sanctified ones who observe the Torah from *alef* to *tav* is retributive, for their failure to stand up against the injustice of others (*Avodah Zarah* 4a, *Shabbat* 55a; see above pp. 28-29). The Rabbis often envision such punishment corresponding precisely with the sin, measure for measure. Although they do not use the idiomatic

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[3] Jim A. Sanders, "Suffering As Divine Discipline in the Old Testament and Post-Biblical Judaism," Colgate Rochester Divinity School Bulletin 28 (1955): 1, as cited in Charles Kroloff, "The Effect of Suffering on the Concept of God in Lamentations Rabba" (Rabbinic thesis, HUC-JIR, 1960), 36.

phrase *middah k'neged middah* in *Sanhedrin* 111a (see above, p. 38), Moses' punishment there implies such exactness; he questions the redemption, and therefore will not see it completely fulfilled. When Abraham, standing in the ruins, pleads the case of his children, God reassures him that they will flourish in the end of time. Their suffering is transitory, and their reward will be in the next world, everlasting (*Menahot* 53b, see above pp. 33-4). Were God not gracious as well as just, the exile would be four times longer. Abraham's intercession serves as a foil for expressing that aspect of God's Divine nature -- or as a key to unleashing it. Homily and history. As is generally the case, the Talmud leaves open both possibilities.

In examining the passages cited in Chapter Two which question God's justice, it may be noted that most of the *aggadot* begin with a presupposition of God's justice and conclude with an affirmation of God's justice. Certainly many of the passages end with God choosing the just path and, to the Rabbis, Divine justice is an essential prerequisite for faith. Elisha b. Abuye, who becomes an apostate, conceivably does so because he is led to doubt God's justice when he sees the tongue of a *tzaddik* cast upon a dung heap. Another version maintains he was led to despair upon witnessing the death of a young boy engaged in doing *mitzvot*. Had he assumed Divine justice

to be somewhere evident nonetheless, the Rabbis speculate, he would not have lost faith.[4] Humanity may not know the answer, but faith demands trust that there is one. One suspects it would have been preferable for Elisha b. Abuye to cry out, hurl words against Heaven, challenge and demand Divine justice, rather than to walk away from his God. The rainmakers and others who hurl their words against Heaven, begging for mercy and demanding God infuse the world with blessing are, in fact, affirming that God will do justly.

In these cases, *hutspa k'lapei shamaya* -- boldness against Heaven -- ultimately serves to affirm Heaven. They do so by invoking traditional assumptions about God in their argument. God is Creator, nurturing Parent to Israel. When Honi (*Taanit* 23a, see above pp. 48-50) and Isaac (*Shabbat* 89b, see above, pp. 54-5) emphasize that the sinning people are God's children, then, they highlight God's record of providential care. God is Fashioner of the human soul and Master of history. For the "Rabbinic" Elijah or Moses to declare God the cause of Israel's sins (*Berakhot* 31b-32a, see above pp. 42-5) does not simply lay blame; they focus on God's power and attest to the Divine imprint on human history. As the guarantor of the moral order of the universe, God too

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[4] *Hullin* 142a, *Kiddushin* 39b. They compare his answer with R. Jacob, who assumes they will receive reward in the next world.

must abide by it. Certain challenges, then, are simply "reminders" of this Divine obligation. "You cannot falsify Your law!" Hannah cries out, and begets a son (*Berakhot* 31b). "You have said that he who preserves one soul of Israel is considered as if he had preserved the whole world;" now act accordingly with Benjamin the Righteous (*Baba Batra* 11a, see above p. 52). He miraculously recovers from his illness. The Rabbis hear Gabriel chide the Almighty for shaming Israel, using God's own revelation as support: "Debate your cause with a neighbor, but do not reveal the secret of another" (Prov. 25:9, *Sanhedrin* 44b, see above pp. 47). This motif goes back to the Biblical Moses, who insists God forgive the people in keeping with God's Self-pronounced merciful nature (Ex. 32:17ff., see above pp. 20-1). Still, it is not made clear whether these reminders are for God or for the human being who encounters the text. In either event, their pleas are immediately effective because God's own word or law is invoked in their defense.

II. Other Answers and Non-Answers

God's law and purpose, however, are not always immediately evident, sending the pious back in search of the root causes of suffering. An interesting twist on the traditional theodicies emerges: *yissurin shel ahavah*,

or chastisements of love. Primarily associated with R. Akiba and his circle, this oxymoron theoretically teaches that the highest goal in the service of God is a mystical-martyrilogical understanding of suffering. As in *Berakhot* 60b, in which Akiba claims that whatever the All-Merciful does is for the good, sufferings are a sign of God's love even without evident positive result.[5] It is clear that most of the Sages, however, could not disconnect chastisements of love from more traditional teachings. Even using Akiba's phrasing, they associate *yissurin shel ahavah* with signs to correct behavior, concentrate more time and energy on the study of Torah, or the "payment" for future reward.

אמר רבא אמר רב סחורה אמר רב הונא כל שהקדוש ב"ה חפץ בו מדכאו ביסורין ...

ואם קבלם מה שכרו זרע יאריך ימים ולא עוד אלא שתלמידו מתקיים בידו ...

אמר רבי חייא בר אבא אמר ר' יוחנן אלו ואלו יסורין של אהבה הן ...

מה שן ועין שהן אחד מאבריו של אדם עבד
יצא בהן לחרות יסורין שממרקין כל גופו של אדם על אחת כמה וכמה ...

תניא רבי שמעון בן יוחאי אומר ג' מתנות טובות נתן הקב"ה לישראל
וכולן לא נתנן אלא על ידי יסורין אלו הן תורה וארץ ישראל והעולם הבא ...

> Raba, in the name of R. Sahorah, in the name of R. Huna, says: If the Holy One Blessed be He, is pleased with a man, He afflicts him with sufferings.... If he accepts them, what is his reward? "He will see his seed, prolong his days" (Deut. 32:24). And more than that, his knowledge [of Torah] will endure with him....
>
> R. Hiyya b. Abba in the name of R. Yohanan

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[5] See Ephraim Urbach, The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs, Israel Abrahams, trans. (Jerusalem: 1979), 442; or E. P. Sanders, "R. Akiba's View of Suffering," Jewish Quarterly Review 63:4 (1973): 332-51.

said: Both [chastenings which involve the intermission of Torah study and chastenings that involve intermission of prayer] are chastenings of love.... As the tooth and eye, which are only one limb of the man and still [if they are hurt], the slave thereby obtains his freedom, how much the more so with painful sufferings which torment the whole body of a man!...[6]

It has been taught: R. Simeon b. Yohai says: The Holy One blessed be He gave Israel three precious gifts, and all of them were given only through suffering. These are: Torah, the Land of Israel, and the world to come....

For all these assertions, their homiletical explanations collapse in the face of actual sufferings. Protest remains a viable response, as experience and history demand the last word.

רבי חייא
בר אבא חלש עול לגביה רבי יוחנן א"ל חביבין
עליך יסורין א"ל לא הן ולא שכרן א"ל הב
לי ידך יהב ליה ידיה ואיקמיה רבי יוחנן חלש
על לגביה ר' חנינא אמר ליה חביבין עליך
יסורין אמר ליה לא הן ולא שכרן א"ל הב לי
ידך יהב ליה ידיה ואיקמיה [א]בא ליקום רבי
יוחנן לנפשיה אמרי *אין הביש מתיר עצמו
מבית האסורים רבי *אלעזר חלש על לגביה
רבי יוחנן חזא דהוה קא גני בבית אפל גליה
לדרעיה וגפל נהורא חזיה דהוה קא בכי רבי
*אלעזר אמר ליה אבאי קא בכית אי משום
תורה דלא אפשת *שנינן אחד המרבה ואחד
הממעיט ובלבד שיכון לבו לשמים ואי משום
מזוני לא כל אדם זכה לשתי שלחנות *אי
משום בני דין גרמא דעשיראה ביד א"ל להאי
שיפרא דבלי בעפרא קא בכינא א"ל על דא
ודאי קא בכית וכבו תריהן אדהכי והכי א"ל
חביבין עליך יסורים א"ל לא הן ולא שכרן א"ל
הב לי ידך יהב ליה ידיה ואיקמיה

R. Hiyya b. Abba fell ill and R. Yohanan went in to visit him. He said to him, "Are your sufferings dear to you?" He replied, "Neither they nor their reward." He said to him, "Give me your hand." He gave him his hand and [Yohanan] raised him.

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[6] Thus, one "obtains freedom" from sin through the sufferings.

> R. Yohanan once fell ill and R. Hanina went in to visit him. He said to him, "Are your sufferings dear to you?" He replied, "Neither they nor their reward." He said to him, "Give me your hand." He gave him his hand and [Hanina] raised him....
>
> R. Eleazar fell ill and R. Yohanan went in to visit him. Seeing that he was lying in a dark room, Yohanan bared his arm and light radiated from it. He noticed that R. Eleazar was weeping and he said to him, "Why do you weep? If it is because you did not study enough Torah, surely we learned: the one who [sacrifices] much and the one who [sacrifices] little are as one, provided that the heart is directed to Heaven (*Menahot* 110b). If it is lack of sustenance, [note that] not everybody has the privilege to enjoy two tables.[7] If it is due to [lack of] children, this is the bone of my tenth son!"
>
> He replied, "I am weeping on account of this beauty[8] that is going to rot in the earth."
>
> "On that account you surely have a reason to weep," and they both wept. In the meanwhile he said to him: "Are your sufferings dear to you?"
>
> "Neither they nor their reward."
>
> "Give me your hand." He gave him his hand and [Yohanan] raised him.[9]

The same Rabbis who adamantly maintain a theoretical explanation of suffering are among those who reject the experience when it becomes personal. "Are your sufferings welcome to you?" "Neither they nor their reward," they protest, and are healed. They reject the homily and instead make history. They cry out against a theological lesson, objecting to God's pedagogical methods, and instead demand real relief. The scene is dramatically repeated with different Rabbinic

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[7] Soncino note: Learning and wealth, or perhaps this world and the next.

[8] Soncino note: i.e., "the beautiful body of yours."

[9] *Berakhot* 5a-b.

personalities, as if to emphasize the ultimate dissatisfaction with any theory. The rejection of *yissurin shel ahavah* is not simply another theological lesson. To read it as only another level of homily, risks denigrating the experience with suffering of these men.

There is an enigmatic *aggadah* in which God, too, seems to acknowledge the inadequacy of traditional theodicies. When the people reject the prospect of future reward -- the most widely accepted explanation for present suffering in Rabbinic times -- a tablet comes down from Heaven with the word "truth" inscribed upon it, vindicating their position.[10] The promise of future reward may be an inadequate explanation of suffering. *Hutspa k'lapei shamaya* is effective because those clamoring for justice and mercy in this world have a point.

Yet at times even the importuning of the most righteous is of no avail. What is the response to Moses' challenge about Akiba's undeserved fate? "Be silent, for My mind is decided" (*Menahot* 29b, see above pp. 34-5). Here God does not come through in "just" fashion, and there is no explanation. There is no mention of future reward or chastisements of love. They would pale beside Moses' vision of Akiba's torturous fate. Rather, it

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[10] *Yoma* 69b.

invites the heretical assertion that, not only is the world morally neutral, pursuing its natural course ("Stolen seed sprouts as luxuriantly as seed honestly acquired," *Avodah Zarah* 54b), but so is God.

The difficulty in reconciling God's omnipotence and omnibenevolence with evil and suffering is realized, but not resolved. Each generation, each teacher struggles with it again. Many of the *aggadot* venture into the uncharted territory where satisfactory answers are not to be found. Beyond homily, they express a real frustration with God's universe, a real protest against the Almighty. The urge to despair of redemption is strong; even Moses falters (*Sanhedrin* 111a, see above p. 38). Although the Holy One of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps, they yearn to cry out, "Awake, why do You sleep, O Lord?" (*Sotah* 48a, see above p. 76). Ultimately, only silence suffices: "Be silent, for My mind is decided." Where the suffering seems all out of proportion to any spiritual result, it becomes the most paralyzing experience of the human soul. With God as the guarantor of the moral order, the failure to resolve the problem of evil touches the very heart of faith.

III. God's Compassion

From a homiletical perspective, it becomes vital to demonstrate God's compassion and concern, even

compromising other Divine attributes to make the point. In fact, the one exception to God's own rule of justice is its frequent submission to Divine mercy. God restricts Divine power at the time of judgement (*Avodah Zarah* 4a, see above pp. 64-5). The wicked but repentant King Manasseh is so beloved that he is taken into heaven even though he is not deserving. It is an act of grace (*Sanhedrin* 103a, see above p. 36). God forgives the Ninevites, perhaps because the unwarranted suffering of their animals is unbearable (*Taanit* 16a, see above p. 53). Lest the people despair that the messiah will never come, know that God desires it, too (*San*hedrin 94a, see above p. 62). The urge is so strong, in fact, it is as if God has to be protected from some prayers, as if that extra push will make redemption irresistible, long before its time (*Baba Metzia* 85b, see above pp. 76-7). The Divine desire to offer love and mercy rather than punishment (even justly deserved) is so great, the Rabbis even imagine that God's Ownself prays for it (*Berakhot* 7a, see above pp. 81-2).

The heroes of Israel must pray for it as well. Hosea and the patriarchs are brought as examples, communicating that a passionate commitment to the welfare of the people, even beyond the strict measure of justice, is a prerequisite for leadership (*Pesahim* 87a-b, *Shabbat* 89b, see above pp. 54-6). Surely this is a lesson that

God has taught humanity, if not in the actual words of these *aggadot*. Thus, it should not be surprising that God accepts their impertinent prayers. Moses' zeal to defend God's people is so admirable, it invites images of him wearying God with his pleas. But no, would it not rather revive God because God, too, desires to forgive the wearisome faithlessness of the people (*Berakhot* 32a, see above p. 44)?

These *aggadot* are simple to accept as homilies, yet this perspective is not sufficient. At times, the text seems clearly to indicate that human intercession truly has an effect. Pinhas is beloved of God because he turns away Divine wrath from Israel (*Sanhedrin* 82b, see above p. 46). The lives of the righteous ones are such a joy to God, that they are rewarded with special access to the Divine will: God makes a decree, and the prayers of the *tzaddikim* annul it. With their prayers and their deeds, they witness to the purpose of creation, and turn away Divine wrath (*Moed Katan* 16b, Sukkah 14a; see above pp. 58-9).

IV. God's Empathy

Ultimately, the practice of thundering against Heaven is undercut primarily by the extent to which God shares in the suffering itself. It becomes essential, in struggling with this paradox, for the Rabbis to emphasize

that God feels for Israel in her suffering. The expression of God's love and faithfulness is so vital, the Rabbis hear God's Ownself defending it. Suffering in exile, Zion and even the faithful Abraham ask for reassurances, and God opens the Divine will to their scrutiny (*Berakhot* 32b, *Menahot* 53b; see above pp. 30, 33-4).

It is more than the promise that God has not abandoned Israel; the crucial point is that even when God does not overwhelm justice with mercy, even when the suffering seems pointless, God empathizes with the people. It is the union of human suffering with the high tragedy of God's own hurt. God weeps and groans in anguish at Israel's distress (*Berakhot* 59a, see above p. 74); their pain causes the glory of the Kingdom of Heaven to be crushed (*Hagigah* 5b, see above p. 73-4). Because God so loves Israel, the Divine Presence is sent into exile with the people, and will return with them (*Megillah* 29a), suggesting that the salvation of God is in some way dependent on the salvation of Israel. If one is occupied with the study of Torah, with charity, and with public prayer, God will account it as if that person has redeemed both God and the children of Israel from exile among the nations of the world (*Berakhot* 8a). They both continue to wait for rescue. In the meantime, in the hour of a person's suffering, God endures pain, a

heaviness of limbs (*Sanhedrin* 46a).

When Tzafenat cries out against her humiliation, and the Rabbis aver that it is for her that Jeremiah utters lamentation in the name of God -- "The spoiler is come upon you and upon Me" -- *kiv'yakhol*, it is as if God stands there, too, naked and ashamed (*Gittin* 58a, see above p. 69). Homily: With such a radical and bold conception, limiting God's power, the Rabbis emphasize that God is intimately involved with the fate of humanity. They seek consolation in the assurance that their pain is keenly appreciated by the Divine Spirit.[11] Empathy is a vital quality in the minds of the Rabbis. "Do not judge your fellow man until you have come into his place" (*Avot* 2:5). Certainly the All-Merciful, the ultimate Judge, must be affected by human feeling. History:

> All such passages... which speak of God's sharing Israel's afflictions, may, of course, indicate no more than that Israel, even in slavery, had an awareness of God's presence, and that God, in His mercy, made Himself accessible to suffering Israel -- without, in any way, being Himself reduced in greatness and power. They may, on the other hand, also express more than that; and the frequent use in such passages of the term *[kiv]'yakhol* ('as it were' or 'if one could possibly say so') would tend to show that at least some of the Rabbis understood God's 'enslavement' as more real than symbolic.

As long as evil has not been conquered, neither God nor

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[11] Robert Katz, "Empathy in Modern Psychotherapy and in the Aggada," Hebrew Union College Annual 30 (1959), 201, 197.

Divine sovereignty are complete. God's perfection has yet to be brought about.[12]

Yet the Rabbis also believe that God is the ultimate cause of the pain, of the evil, as well as the source of goodness and blessing. R. Alexandri implies it in his personal prayer: we want to do Your will, but the evil inclination and subjugation to foreign powers prevents us (*Berakhot* 17a, see above p. 42, fn. 26). God created those obstacles. God "admits" as much to Moses and Elijah (*Berachot* 31b-32a, see above pp. 42-5). In affirming God's power to start and stop the suffering, the concept of empathy becomes problematic. The Arab merchant states the dilemma succinctly: The whole world is Yours. You caused Rabbah b. Nahmani's death, and yet You grieve so. You cannot express Your tremendous pain through this world; it cannot withstand You, and it is not ultimately to blame (*Baba Metzia* 86a, see above p. 53). From this paradox, derive God's perceived weakness and uncertainty.

> Why cannot the lord of creation, the sole author of human history, merely direct events on earth according to his pleasure and spare himself this pain? What is the ineluctable source of his hurt?...
>
> Is it not a conflict between God's justice and his commitment which creates the divine dilemma and the grief -- his justice at odds with his

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[12] Jakob. J. Petuchowski, Theology and Poetry (Boston, 1978), 86-88.

commitment?[13]

This is the conflict that explains how God can "regret" creating the exile and the evil inclination (*Sukkah* 52b, see above p. 74). It elucidates the notion of God needing to exercise Self-restraint, suffering the wicked to endure (*Yoma* 69b, see above pp. 65-6). It begins to explain the amazing concept of God making atonement: God so hates to cause pain, even when necessary, the Rabbis imagine the Almighty brings a sacrifice (*Hullin* 60b, see above pp. 82-3). Atonement becomes the process of Divine reconciliation of justice and mercy: at-One-ment.

It is significant, however, that the Rabbis seem more ready to compromise -- metaphorically or not -- God's power rather than God's justice or love. It illumines our psychological understanding of the authors of this literature and, perhaps, also our conception of the Deity. To confirm that the relationship between God and Israel could never be severed, to maintain their integrity in the face of inexplicable suffering, to hold out the hope of redemption -- *aggadah* speaks in the language of survival to support a nation downtrodden and persecuted. If the world does not seem to support the idea of a completely good God who is all-knowing and all-powerful, which tenet may occasionally be forfeited

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[13] Sheldon Blank, "Doest Thou Well to be Angry?" Hebrew Union College Annual 26 (1955), 36.

without destroying faith?

God's empathy does not completely resolve the problem of theodicy; it does, however, make the paradox livable. "A Job, yea, a people, contests with God...and then returns to living as best it can."[14] It is, after all, the business of living on which the Rabbis concentrated.

An essential element of empathy guides the way that life is lived. Empathy involves more than sharing of feelings and ideas; it involves the process of making oneself "like" another.[15] Such identification constitutes mainstream Rabbinic theology when envisioned as *imitatio Dei*. While God is infinite and unimaginable, humanity was created in the image of God. In the search for a path of life, Judaism tries to maximize the Divine spark within, to follow in God's ways. Yet, as Voltaire has said, "If God made man in His image, we have certainly returned the compliment."[16] Thus the imitation of God becomes a modelling of God after the righteous person. Following in God's ways is the performance

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[14] Kroloff, "The Effect of Suffering on the Concept of God in Lamentations Rabba" (Rabbinic thesis, HUC-JIR, 1960), 76.

[15] Katz, "Empathy in Modern Psychotherapy and in the Aggada," 194.

[16] As quoted in Joseph Telushkin, Uncommon Sense: The World's Fullest Compendium of Wisdom (New York: Shapolsky Publishers, 1987), 85.

of *mitzvot*, because God does them.[17] Torah represents the inner life of God and the source for determining God's will. Revealer and Revelation merge. This principle includes images in which Heaven becomes a realm of Torah, finding its most vivid expression, perhaps, in the idea of God studying Torah (*Avodah Zarah* 3b, see above pp. 80-1). Since the Sage is transformed into a salvific figure through his mastery of Torah, God specifically becomes modelled after the Sage. So it is, that God studies Torah, binds phylacteries, prays (*Berakhot* 7a, see above pp. 81-2), has a Rabbinic court in heaven (*Makkot* 13b-14a), and participates in *halakhic* discussions (*Berakhot* 63b, *Baba Metzia* 86a; see above pp. 79-80, 67). So it is, that the authority of the Almighty and the authority of the Rabbis are directly and indirectly made comparable; arguing with one's teacher is like arguing with the Divine Presence (*Sanhedrin* 110a). Torah is not in Heaven; one must bow to the will of the majority (*Baba Metzia* 59b, see above pp. 68-9).

The didactic purpose is clear. In order to express the consciousness of the presence of God, the religious imagination dares great anthropomorphisms. In order to emphasize the value of the study of Torah, the Talmudic Rabbis describe God as studying Torah. In order to stress that Rabbinic authority must be obeyed, there is a

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[17] For example, *Sotah* 14a.

tale that indicates even God acquiesces.

Yet the insistent comparison of God with humanity, even the rabbinization of God, does not draw God downward. Even "God incarnate remains God ineffable."[18] It does not compromise God's perfection. God is still God, and we are drawn upwards toward Divine perfection. The path entails a growing intimacy with the All-Merciful, and a growing understanding of the will of the Almighty.

"Such stories reveal a shockingly profound access to God's inner life....

> God is so vulnerable to the pleas of God's children as to need to be protected from divine graciousness. God so agonizes over behaving justly toward God's people as to open the divine will to their scrutiny. God so exults in God's law as to rejoice even when the people quote it against God. These metaphors offer an imaginative reconnaissance of the divine interiority.[19]

These metaphors perhaps also offer insight into the most historical aspect of these *aggadot* -- the Rabbis' truest and most profound experience of God are expressed therein. Homily and history.

Having uncovered some basic underlying questions and assumptions, more questions surface. The search for a proper understanding of these texts requires contexts.

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[18] Jacob Neusner, The Incarnation of God (Philadelphia, 1988), 230.

[19] Belden C. Lane, "*Hutspa K'lapei Shamaya*: A Christian Response to the Jewish Tradition of Arguing with God," Journal of Ecumenical Studies 23:4 (1986): 576.

It is important to consider why the passages have the form and style that they do. To the extent that they are theological lessons, why are they couched in these terms? Even more significant are the fundamental theological issues to which they point.

CHAPTER FIVE

HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS

I. Talmud is Not Univocal

Certainly, there is not a single answer that will explain why such passages are part of the sacred canon of Judaism, nor the significance of the ideas they convey. In part, this complexity is due to the fact that the Talmud is a compilation of many different Rabbinic opinions.

> Writers generally speak of Rabbinic belief, Rabbinic doctrine, as if they were held generally, paying not the slightest attention to the places and times of their origin. They do not see the differences between theological conceptions of the Tannaitic teachers and those of the Amoraic period, between South and North, between Palestine and Babylon, Alexandria and Jerusalem. Each saying must be judged in relation to the time and country of its teacher. We have to weigh and measure with the just *ephah* of the past and just *hin* of the future.... External sources of knowledge have to be considered in the same way as human feelings and longings for the unseen or supernatural, in dealing with the highest and sublimest questions about God.[1]

It is likely, however, that many traditions are preserved in the names of teachers who may or may not be responsible for them. If the attribution is correct, one still wonders whether the oral tradition has embellished or changed the story in any way. If brought by one Sage in the name of another, whose time and environment determine the motives for the passage, or its correct interpretation? These and other variables make the trail of evidence that Marmorstein demands very hard to trace.

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[1] Marmorstein, The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God, 2 vols. (1927; reprint edn., New York, 1968), 1:12.

Also, in exploring the theological impact of the *aggadot*, it is essential to consider that Jewish tradition has treated the Talmudic text as a unit, an intact record of a Divine oral tradition. While this fact does not vitiate the value of a critical approach, it suggests caution and balance. Still, it is clear in the selection of texts that there is not a univocal attitude regarding *hutzpa k'lapei shamaya*. In explaining the phenomenon, it is worthwhile to note the possible influence of particular trends, ideas, environments.

A. Rationalists Vs. Mystics

Judah HaNasi, for instance, was a committed rationalist. He did all that he could, in compiling the Mishnah, to exclude mystical references and traditions, such as detailed angelology and elaborations on God's chariot. They certainly existed in his time, however, for many are preserved in other *tannaitic* literature. *Merkavah* mysticism, for instance, designates the varied speculations, homilies, and visions regarding the Throne of Glory and the chariot which bears it, along with many other details of the Divine world. The first chapter of Ezekiel, containing the prophet's vision of the Divine chariot, was an impetus to much of this study. The Mishnah mentions *ma'aseh merkavah* in *Hagigah* 2:1, only to caution against its study:

> The subject of the chariot may not be expounded before one person, unless he is a Sage and comprehends his own knowledge. Whoever contemplates these four matters, it would be better if he had not come into this world: what is above, what is below, what was before, and what will be after.

More favorable attitudes reappear in the *gemara*, with mystical writings preserved in the Talmud under the names of Yohanan b. Zakkai, Eliezer b. Hyrkanus, Akiba b. Joseph, Yohanan (b. Nappaha), Ishmael b. Elisha, and others. It may be more than coincidence that R. Yohanan, a master of *merkavah* mysticism, is the one who says God does nothing without consulting the Heavenly Court. Akiba is the one who places the Divine prerogative of forgiving sins in the Heavenly Court. Fascinated with the world above, they imagine that the entourage of angels escorting the Divine chariot is also invaluable in God's decision-making process.[2] Ishmael b. Elisha's incredible vision of blessing the Almighty, Akatriel Yah, is one of many mystical statements and literary works ascribed to him.[3] It is possible to speculate, then, that those Sages who engage in mystical studies may be more open to bold conceptions of God sharing power, or

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[2] *Sanhedrin* 38b, *Makkot* 13b-14a; see above pp. 77, 78. R. Yohanan's expertise in *merkavah* mysticism is noted in *Hagigah* 13a.

[3] *Berakhot* 7a, see above pp. 81-2. There is speculation that this vision is a later, Gaonic interpolation in the text, but Gershom Scholem dismisses the idea, noting the legend is established in the earliest *hekhalot* literature. See Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism (1954; reprint edn., New York, 1974), 41.

becoming strikingly human in the personal encounter. Their ideas about meeting God, understanding the secret message of Divine revelation, and seeking truly to know about the Divine world invite such interpretations. Yet they do not become mainstream; there continues to be concern about the dark, dangerous power of such studies, their possibly heretical influence on untrained or unstable minds, their dangerous similarity to gnostic ideas (see, *e.g.*, *Hagigah* 13a).

B. Institutionalists Vs. Charismatics

It seems there is also an interesting dynamic between men of deeds and men of learning. Hanina b. Dosa, who lived in the first century C.E., is recorded as the last of the *anshei ma'aseh* (men of deeds).[4] Although later scholars also accomplish miracles with their prayers, there is a noticeable tendency to deemphasize wonder-working abilities. It is likely that the charismatic was suspect to the Rabbis because he was outside their structure and claimed authority that they claimed for themselves. Simeon's rebuke of Honi,[5] significantly, is later cited as evidence that a person slighting a Rabbi should be placed under a ban.[6] In

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[4] *Sotah* 9:15.

[5] *Taanit* 23a, see above pp. 48-50.

[6] *Berakhot* 19a.

fact, Simeon states that Honi risked slighting God, not a Rabbi. This third century twist on events indicates the underlying issue was one of Rabbinic authority. *Hutzpa k'lapei shamaya* may also be *k'lapei rabbanim*, so the head of the Sanhedrin must protest.

A narrative involving Hanina b. Dosa similarly offers evidence of tension between charismatics and institutionalists.[7] After Hanina b. Dosa's prayers cure Yohanan b. Zakkai's son, the latter expresses amazement that he can just put his head between his knees and launch an effective prayer. There is no *hutzpa*; it is shocking for the same reason his prayer for rain is shocking (*Taanit* 24b) -- for its very unorthodox, extravagant style, combined with its immediate effectiveness.[8] When Yohanan b. Zakkai's wife asks if that means b. Dosa is greater than he, he quips that Hanina b. Dosa is like a servant before the King, while he is like a noble. Rashi interprets this comparison to

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[7] *Berakhot* 34b. The text mentions an interesting detail, however: b. Dosa is on his way to study Torah with Yohanan b. Zakkai. This "man of deeds" is not totally outside the Rabbinic circle.

[8] The text first states that b. Dosa "lay" his head between his knees; b. Zakkai changes the verb, however, from *hiniah* [lay] to *hitiah* [cast] -- the same word used in the phrase to "hurl/cast words against Heaven" (*e.g.*, *Berakhot* 31b-32a). David Daube notes the slightly different phrasing when Elijah assumes a similar posture, and speculates that it was considered quite bold for a man, without the gift of prophecy, to pray in such a position. See "Enfant Terrible," Harvard Theological Review 68 (1975): 374.

mean that the famous man of deeds may have better access to the Almighty, but Yohanan b. Zakkai, a revered scholar, has higher status and regard. The correlative implication is that impertinent behavior may be tolerated from a lowly servant, but the elevated and evolved develop a more sophisticated relationship. *Hutzpa k'lapei shamaya* may get its most sympathetic reception among the charismatics, who cherish their access to the Divine will.

Alexander Guttmann offers a speculation on why Eliezer is banned which suggests another problem with "miracles": he is a specialist in the halakhic brand of sorcery[9] and is suspected of Christian sympathies.[10] Since the Christians frequently used miracles as propaganda to substantiate their gospel, these two elements fit together, becoming a threat to the majority of Rabbis.[11] R. Joshua's triumph over Eliezer, although it may seem to compromise God's authority, protects the

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[9] See *Sanhedrin* 68a, in which he recounts teaching Akiba about his magic with cucumbers.

[10] In *Avodah Zarah* 16b, it is recorded that the Romans arrested him with the same suspicions.

[11] Alexander Guttmann, "The Significance of Miracles for Talmudic Judaism," in Studies in Rabbinic Judaism (New York, 1976) 66ff. He supports his view by analyzing the aftermath of the incident, and by citing other cases of excommunication. Although R. Joshua (who rebukes the *bat kol*) is known for not attacking the Christian sects, his concern may be for the purity of the faithful. Certainly the ban, which Joshua did not necessarily initiate, may conform to Guttmann's thesis.

process by which Christian interpretations are refuted. Even though Eliezer is cleared at the time of his death, the passage documents a permanent shift: by the third generation of *tannaim*, there was a tradition not to mention miracles in support of an interpretation.[12] God's contribution to the debate certainly is miraculous, and thus cannot be the decisive voice.

C. Rival Schools

Another dynamic that has been noted is competition between the rival "schools." Although the best evidence is contained within passages that relate explicit competition for position and power,[13] the debate which results in R. Eliezer's excommunication may also relate somewhat to these tensions. R. Gamaliel is *Nasi*, the first representative of the Hillelite dynasty in the aftermath of the Temple's destruction. R. Eliezer is a student of R. Yohanan b. Zakkai, who escaped from the ruins to found the prestigious academy at Yavneh. Gamaliel must be a driving force in establishing the ban

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[12] *Berakhot* 60a, *Hullin* 43a.

[13] For example, *Berakhot* 27b-28a, *Horayot* 13b. See R. Goldenberg, "History and Ideology," in volume 4 of William Scott Green, ed., Approaches to Ancient Judaism (Chico, California, 1983), 159-71 for a fuller discussion. *Berakhot* 27b-28a details Gamaliel's deliberate slighting of Joshua after a *halakhic* disagreement, which unexpectedly results in the *Nasi*'s temporary demotion.

against Eliezer (Gamaliel's brother-in-law), for he interprets the storm at sea to be related to that decision.[14] Is it due to Eliezer's narrow interpretations which constantly conflict with his own approach? Is Eliezer's status encroaching on Gamaliel's authority, so the latter takes this opportunity to eliminate the threat? In order to do so, Gamaliel has to support R. Joshua's rebuke of the *bat kol*. Perhaps he agrees that the Torah is no longer in Heaven. Perhaps Gamaliel's ambition is so compelling, he would even condone impertinence against Heaven in order to secure his position. God's apparent displeasure with the harshness of the decree, especially in light of God's delight with the *halakhic* process, may be understood as a Talmudic condemnation of such infighting. Gamaliel defends himself by insisting it is not a petty power struggle, but an effort to preserve unity in Israel. His bold reproach of Heaven, seemingly a desperate call in desperate circumstances, does not challenge God's justice, but rather affirms God's glory: "Master of the Universe! You surely know that I have not acted for my honor, nor for the honor of my paternal house, but for Yours, so that strife may not multiply in Israel."

The rival schools are most clearly defined by differences in their general approach to Biblical

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[14] *Baba Metzia* 59b, see above pp. 52-3.

interpretation, a prime example being the school of R. Akiba versus the school of R. Ishmael. Akiba insists that every superfluous word and even the crowns of the letters are significant,[15] while Ishmael maintains that Torah speaks in the language of human beings, with figures of speech and occasional repetitions.[16]

D. Allegorists Vs. Literalists

Arthur Marmorstein characterizes their differences as an example of the tension between advocates of literal interpretation and those of allegorical interpretation. He cites Akiba, Abbahu, Joshua b. Hananiah, Yohanan, Resh Lakish as examples of literalists, and Ishmael, Yosi the Galilean, Zeira, Hiyya b. Abba and Eliezer as examples of allegorists.[17] While the latter seek a different way to understand anthropomorphic representations of God in the Bible, literalists like Akiba have no difficulty with them. In fact, they greatly enlarge upon this aspect of

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[15] cf. *Menahot* 29b, pp. 34-5 above.

[16] *Keritot* 11a.

[17] Marmorstein, The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God, 2:133ff. Max Kadushin takes issue with this characterization of the literal-allegorical dialectic for several reasons. He challenges the methodology, since Marmorstein occasionally changes attributions to fit the theory. Most importantly, the questions raised within the text about anthropomorphism often affirm it, rather than overcome it. See The Rabbinic Mind (New York, 1952), 277ff.

the literature. The following passage offers a stark contrast:

עד די כרסון רמיו כתי איבא לביניה *אחד לו ואחד לדוד דתניא אחד לו ואחד לדוד דברי ר"ע א"ל ר' יוסי עקיבא עד כתי אתה עושה שכינה חול אלא אחד לדין ואחד לצדקה

> [How can the heretical challenge of two powers be refuted when it says] "Until thrones were placed" (Dan. 7:9)? One [throne] was for Himself and one for David....This is R. Akiba's view. R. Yosi said to him: Akiba, how long will you profane the Divine Presence? Rather, one was for justice and the other for mercy (acquittal).

Akiba offers a literal interpretation that envisions two thrones; God sits on one of them as would a mortal. In fact, David sits nearby, on the second one. Yosi the Galilean, a good allegorist, maintains that the plural represents two attributes of God. His interpretation avoids the image of a nice old God, sitting on a fancy chair. Yet this analysis of the two opinions downplays the final result of the controversy, which is itself anthropomorphic:

*א"ל ר' אלעזר בן עזריא עקיבא *מה לך אצל הגדה כלך אצל נגעים ואהלות אלא אחד לכבא ואחד לשרפרף כבא לישב עליו שרפרף להדום רגליו

> R. Eleazar b. Azariah said to him: Akiba, what are you doing [teaching] *aggadah*? Confine yourself to [the study of the legalistic tractates] *Negaim* and *Ohalot*. Rather, one was a throne, the other a footstool: a throne for a seat and a footstool to support His feet.[18]

There is an alternative way to analyze the tension in *aggadot* such as the one cited above. Almost all articulate discussion of God necessarily involves anthropomorphism; the Rabbinic judgement depends on its

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[18] *Sanhedrin* 38b.

something else entirely.

ר' שמואל בר נחמני אמר משום
גאוותה של מלכות שמים (כ) ומי איכא בכיה קמיה הקב"ה והאמר רב פפא אין עצבות לפני הקב"ה שנאמר
°הוד והדר לפניו עוז ותפארה במקומו לא קשיא (ל) הא בבתי גואי הא בבתי בראי

> R. Samuel b. Nahmani said: [God weeps] for the glory of the Kingdom of Heaven. But is there any weeping on the part of the Holy One blessed be He? Did not R. Papa say: There is no grief on the part of the Holy One blessed be He, for it is said, "Honor and majesty are before Him; strength and beauty are in His place" (Ps. 96:6).
>
> There is no contradiction; the first case refers to the inner chambers and the other case refers to the outer chambers.[22]

The infinite, imageless God is described as having inner and outer parts -- certainly not a resolution of the anthropomorphic question. The overriding concern regarding God's weeping may be to validate two seemingly contradictory Rabbinic opinions, or perhaps the *aggadah* seeks to describe weeping in God's secret inside part as a non-physical activity, or as an expression of compassion that does not affect God's outer display of power and control. The philosopher's problem would be with the notion of God expressing emotion at all, or being thus affected by events on earth.

Yet the Rabbinic and philosophic issues are often connected, especially in cases depicting Divine pathos. Frequently, anthropomorphism is a vehicle for expressing the non-confrontational form of *hutzpa k'lapei shamaya*. It is not a bold protest against Heaven, but a subtle

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[22] *Hagigah* 5b. The inner chambers refer to the "secret," expounded immediately prior to the cited passage.

diminution of Divine power.

> אמר רב כהנא משום רבי ישמעאל ברבי יוסי מאי דכתיב °למנצח מזמור לדוד זמרו לפני שנוצחין אותו ושמח באוראה שלא במדת הקב"ה מדת בשר ודם בשר ודם מנצחין אותו ועצב אבל הקב"ה נוצחין אותו ושמח שנאמר °ויאמר להשמידם לולי משה בחירו עמד בפרץ לפניו
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> R. Kahana said in the name of R. Ishmael son of R. Yosi: What is the meaning of the verse, "To the victor... A psalm of David" (Ps. 4:1)? Sing praises to Him who is happy when they conquer Him.[23] Come and see how the nature of the Holy One Blessed be He is unlike that of mortals. A mortal, when he is conquered, is unhappy. But the Holy One blessed be He -- conquer Him and He is happy, as it is said, "He said that He would destroy them, had not Moses, the chosen one, stood before Him in the breach [to turn back His wrath]" (Ps. 106:23).[24]

R. Kahana seeks to demonstrate how God is different than man, because a man would be unhappy about conceding. While it does draw a distinction, God is not wholly Other; rather, God appears to have the emotions of a wise, gracious human being. God is "conquered," and rejoices. Such a characterization draws God near, allowing humanity to understand the ineffable. God's love for Israel becomes tangible. Yet this image also portrays a God who can be defeated. These are Rabbinic concerns that require an anthropomorphic portrayal of God.

There is another connection as well. The small sampling of texts cited in this thesis indicates there is

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[23] *La-m'natzeah* [to the victor] is understood to mean "the One who causes another to be victorious," and thus is happy about it.

[24] *Pesahim* 119a. God rejoices that Moses triumphs over Divine anger, saving Israel.

a correlation between anthropomorphism and *hutspa k'lapei shamaya*: more "literalists" than "allegorists" are found in the passages which challenge or confront God.[25] This correspondence signals compatibility, if not interdependence, of the ideas which attribute human form and human weakness to God.

It seems rash to dismiss completely Marmorstein's thesis that the literal-allegorical dialectic touches upon anthropomorphic concerns. Nevertheless, Schechter's and Kadushin's points are significant, indicating there is a broader range of issues to consider.

II. Polemics Against Christians and Gnostics

Schechter suggests that the dual tendency is polemical. Even though he seems to view the Rabbinic lack of consistency as a virtue, at one point he writes:

> The fact is that the Rabbis were a simple, naive people, filled with a childlike scriptural faith, neither wanting nor bearing much analysis and interpretation....What to the Rabbis was a simple adjective, a reverential expression, or a poetic metaphor, turned in the hands of the Hellenists into a new deity, an aeon, or a distinct emanation. The Rabbis felt perplexed, and in their consternation and horror went, as we have seen, from one extreme to the other.[26]

They fight the overly literal because it would enable

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[25] See, *e.g.*, pp. 30-1, 45, 58, 68-9, 71, 81, 82-3, and compare the persons mentioned with Marmorstein's identification of the two schools.

[26] Schechter, Some Aspects of Rabbinic Theology, 42-3.

sectarians to challenge the unity, power, and goodness of God. Two thrones must be for two gods. God is not excellent in power (*Avodah Zarah* 4a). If God is excellent in power, then the existence of evil becomes an indication of God's malevolence. Marcion, a pseudo-Christian gnostic, uses Biblical prooftexts, maintaining that the God of the Jews is a god who "lies, makes experiments as in ignorance, deliberates and changes his purpose, envies, hardens hearts, makes blind and deaf, commits pilfering, mocks, is weak, unjust, makes evil things, does evil...,"[27] etc. This god ceases to be God. Yet Yosi the Galilean's typical allegorical interpretation of problematic plurals, referring to justice and mercy as two aspects of God's nature, becomes a volatile idea as well. The inherent danger in such an approach is that these terms become hypostatized, taking on an independent existence. In the eyes of sectarians, they continue to compromise the unity of the Deity. Indeed, having the Attribute of Justice argue with God about a decision seems to invite such heresy. God seems neither completely just nor completely powerful. The Rabbis still incorporate these potentially damaging ideas, trying to keep them within the limits of their system and theology. Despite attacks from every side,

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[27] A. Marmorstein, "The Background of the Haggadah," Hebrew Union College Annual 6 (1929): 151.

the belief in the existence and unity of God permeated all voices within the Jewish community.

> Amidst all these embarrassments, contradictions, confusions, and aberrations, however, the great principle of the Synagogue, that worship is due only to God, remained untouched.[28]

While differing in method, literalists and allegorists both seek to draw God close to the world, to make the will and nature of the Divine Being a palpable influence in people's lives.

Various phenomena within Rabbinic literature are thought to have a polemical basis. Anson Laytner, for instance, concludes many of the instances of "forceful prayer" serve as counter-attacks against the teachings of gnosticism and Christianity, both major threats to Judaism in the late *tannaitic* and early *amoraic* periods (2nd-4th C.).[29] After the fall of the second Temple, Judaism was confronted with a national crisis, raising very real doubts about Divine justice. Christianity offered the malevolent interpretation that God had abrogated the Divine covenant with Israel. In its place stood the "new Israel" and the "new law." Gnosticism felt further justified in portraying the God of Israel as a malicious, unbending God of cruel justice (the

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[28] Schechter, Some Aspects of Rabbinic Theology, 44.

[29] Anson Laytner, "*Hutspa K'lapei Shamaya*" (Rabbinic thesis, HUC-JIR, 1979), 69. See also, A. Marmorstein, "The Background of the Haggadah," 141-204.

Demiurgos, versus the utterly transcendent "good" god). The national disaster and displacement of the Jews would, perhaps, make the people more susceptible to infection by these alien, antagonistic conceptions.[30] To these inner doubts and outer threats, Judaism demanded an answer. *Hutzpa k'lapei shamaya*, therefore, could serve a vital apologetic purpose. Israel's God had not abandoned Israel; God was there, listening to the cries of the people, even as they cried out in the agony of despair and the anger of justice denied. God seemed, if anything, more intimate, more responsive on account of the suffering. To Marcion's accusation that the Hebrew God is not faithful, one could juxtapose Zion's identical accusation in *Berakhot* 32b (see above p. 30), and glory in the refutation offered, as it were, by God's own Self: "Yet I will not forget you." God is unjustly punishing the righteous with the wicked, Marcion charged. The Talmud counters by raising the same question, and answering that they are not truly righteous (*Avodah Zarah* 4a, *Shabbat* 55a; see above pp. 28-9), or that they will be rewarded in the world-to-come.[31]

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[30] Laytner, "*Hutzpa K'lapei Shamaya*," 69ff.

[31] For example, *Avodah Zarah* 4b says that Israel must do *mitzvot* now, but will receive reward for them only in the world to come. *Baba Batra* 10a records Akiba in a dispute, maintaining that God afflicts those who are beloved so that they may receive their future reward.
For a more complete list of Marcion's indictment, and Talmudic passages that seem to counter these

To the extent that these statements are a matter of external polemical concerns, and even as internal theological issues, time and place become extremely significant. Jacob Neusner argues that the most suggestive statements in Jewish literature indicating what he calls "the incarnation of God" -- the transformation of God into a personality and a person -- are in the Babylonian Talmud. It was in Babylonia that scholars did not have to address directly the rapidly growing Christian religion and its god incarnate, Jesus. While it is not within the purview of this thesis to explore such a question, it serves as an example, demonstrating how location may affect polemical issues and, therefore, affect the text.[32]

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accusations, see A. Marmorstein, "The Background of the Haggadah," 151ff.

[32] Jacob Neusner, The Incarnation of God, 165ff. It is quite probable that this particular threat was less strong in Babylonia. *Pesahim* 56a notes that, although the silent response to the *Shema* was changed to a vocal one in Palestine (ostensibly in an effort to flush out the sectarians who would add in Jesus' name as a partner in the Kingdom), it was not changed in Nehardea (Babylonia). Michael Chernick maintains that the differences in locale had a broader impact. The clear polytheism of Babylonian Zoroastrianism was not as subtle a challenge and therefore not as dangerous a threat. In addition, he suggests, the Sassanian rulers (3rd-5th C.) were relatively tolerant; quarrel with the majority religion was not necessary. See Chernick, "Some Talmudic Responses to Christianity, Third and Fourth Centuries," Journal of Ecumenical Studies 17:3 (1980): 400.

According to Michael Chernick[33], the Rabbis of the second and third centuries were most concerned about Jewish-Christians and Jewish-Gnostics; these were the people who could make real inroads among the Jewish population. They took an offensive strategy, trying to isolate them from the Jewish community. R. Judah (3rd century Babylonian *amora*) brings a tradition in the name of Samuel: the Rabbis abolished the recitation of the ten commandments in prayer so to discomfit the sectarians.[34] They did it in Palestine and in Babylonia. It is also R. Judah who recites a tradition that God studies Torah. The imperative to affirm the Torah against all forms of antinomianism is so great, he can even imagine God must study. The Sages also began to focus even more heavily on commitment to Rabbinic tradition as the center of religious faith, weakening the pull of a heretical twist on the Bible. They enacted regulations against contact with the sectarians.

By the fourth century, however, Christianity held sway over Palestine and posed a serious threat, even from the outside. Within the Talmud, theologies of the exile, chosenness, and persecution developed to counter Christian interpretation of the Jewish reality. R.

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[33] Michael Chernick, "Some Talmudic Responses to Christianity, Third and Fourth Centuries," 393-406.

[34] *Berakhot* 12a, generally interpreted to mean that the sectarians maintained only these ten were binding.

Abbahu, a fourth century Palestinian Rabbi, stands out as a polemicist against Christian theological notions. One may see Abbahu's contention that the righteous annul God's decrees (*Moed Katan* 16b, see above p. 58) as holding out hope that the suffering of Israel is only temporary; righteous behavior will cause God to lift them up again. R. Abbahu's arguments are more pointed in the following:

א"ל ההוא מינא לרבי אבהו אלהיכם *גרכן הוא דקאמר ליה להזקאל
*שכב על צדך השמאלי וכתיב *ושכבת על צדך הימני אתא ההוא תלמידא
א"ל מיטו דשכיבתא א"ל היתא *אמינא לכו מילתא דשייא *להדדיתו אמר
הקב"ה לישראל זרעו שש והשמישו שבע כדי שתדעו שהארץ שלי היא והן
לא עשו כן אלא הטאו וגלו מנהגו של עולם בשר ודם שכרתה עליו
מדינה אם אכזרי הוא הורג את כולן אם רחמן הוא הורג חצים אם רחמן מלא
רחמים הוא מייסר הגדולים שבהן ביסורין אף כך הקב"ה מייסר את יהזקאל
כדי לנקות עונותיהם של ישראל

A certain *min* said to R. Abbahu: "Your God is a maker of sport. One moment he told Ezekiel, `Lie on your left side' (Ezek. 4:4), and then it is written, `Lie on your right side' (v. 6)." A certain student happened by and asked, "What is the reason for the sabbatical year [in which fields lie fallow]?"

He said to them, "I will now say something that will answer both of you. The Holy One blessed be He said, `Sow for six years and lay fallow the seventh, so that you know the land is Mine.' But they did not do so; rather, they sinned and were exiled. It is the way of the world that if a state rebels against its king he destroys it utterly if he is cruel. If he is merciful, he destroys half the inhabitants. If he is merciful beyond measure then he afflicts only the leaders with sufferings. So God afflicted Ezekiel in order to cleanse Israel from sin.[35]

Israel's election has not been overturned. God does not arbitrarily change a decision. Rather, Israel is being punished with exile and Israel's prophet, Ezekiel,

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[35] *Sanhedrin* 39a.

suffers vicariously for his people's sin. Vicarious suffering may seem unjust, but it does have some basis in Jewish theology, and it elegantly supplants the Christian model of Jesus as the vehicle for atonement.

Not everything, however, can be explained according to what we know about the Rabbis' historical environment. Zwi Werblowsky suggests that finding a polemical angle to every *aggadic* utterance reflects the apologetic nature of the research itself, answering modern critics. While he admits that outer and inner challenges bring religion to more articulate reflection and polemical definition of its doctrines, he insists that this is a far cry from uncovering a polemical purpose behind every Rabbinic statement.[36]

R. Isaac, a second century *tanna* from Babylonia, raises the issue of God abandoning Israel (*Menahot* 53b, see above pp. 33-4). According to Chernick, this is an issue raised in the fourth century by Christianity. The bold challenges to Divine justice span the centuries from antiquity to modern times. If the polemical disputes changed and grew, as Chernick maintains, why do the questions remain the same? When a people faces disaster, it is not necessary to have others question their status or relationship to God in order to raise doubts. The

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[36] R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, Introduction to Marmorstein's The Doctrine of Merits in Old Rabbinical Literature, (1920; reprint edn. New York, 1968), vii.

events themselves will automatically draw formerly held beliefs into question. The desire to develop acceptable theodicies cannot be new to the Rabbis, influenced by gnostic attacks, nor even new to Biblical figures to answer paganism. It is an integral part of the theistic drive to comprehend one's fate.

> "The interest of the Jews in affirming that God is in every place was not philosophical or primarily theological, but immediately religious.... The almighty power of God was not... a theological attribute of omnipotence which belongs in idea to the perfection of God; it was, as in the prophets, the assurance that nothing can withstand [God's] judgement or thwart [God's] purpose.[37]

Yet, because personal anguish and the national catastrophes of 68 and 135 C.E. caused doubts about God's might, among Jews as well as non-Jews, the literature of the age overflows with questions, apologies, theodicies. Those who challenge God are not simply responding to critics; they are protesting against evil, undue suffering, exile, death -- from the depths of their faith and their fear. Those who respond offer consolation and blessing, and a growing closeness to God. These functions of *aggadah* are explicitly stated in *midrashic* collections: If you wish to know the One who spoke and the world came into being, study *aggadah* (*Sifrei* 85a). Before, when people had change in their pockets, they

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[37] George Foot Moore, Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of the Tannaim, 1 (Cambridge, 1927): 371-5.

liked to listen to legal expositions. Now that the money is gone, and we are sick on account of the ruling power, people want to hear something from the Bible and from *aggadah* (*Pesikta d'Rav Kahana*, S. Buber edition, 101b).

There are other factors arguing against a completely polemical explanation. Chernick himself notes that Rabbinic Judaism is more concerned with orthopraxy than with orthodoxy, providing great latitude in the realm of ideas -- even about God.[38] In addition, the Rabbis surely are aware that each defense opens up another weakness in the bulwark protecting their faith. One challenger claims the Jewish God is too immanent, and the other attacks YHWH as too transcendent. If they humanize God to answer Marcion, they open themselves up to the incarnation of God, i.e., Jesus. If they show God opening the Divine will to Israel for scrutiny in order to defend God's justice or the special relationship with Israel, gnostics and others could attack such a limited God. The suggestion that God's mind might be changed opens up the devastating possibility that God's initial choice of Israel and the giving of the law are now rejected.

While there is certainly a polemical aspect to the Talmud, most passages are clearly identified as such.

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[38] Michael Chernick, "Some Talmudic Responses to Christianity, Third and Fourth Centuries," 394.

The setting may be an explicit dispute with a sectarian, a Roman emperor, or the infamous Philosopher and Matron. Clear phraseology may be used: If a man should say to you..., everyone who says..., so as not to give a chance to say..., an answer to one who says..., so that they should not say....[39] Also there are paradigmatic figures, generally understood to represent Israel's enemies, such as Esau or Edom. Other such formal introductions exist for arguments with *minim* and non-Jews. While this fact does not preclude other polemical motives, not clearly marked,[40] there must surely be a significant portion of the Talmud that is truly inner-directed. It is, after all, a guide for the faithful. They, too, are compelled to explore the reaches of Divine justice, faithfulness, power.

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[39] Hebrew equivalents are: **ואם יאמר לך אדם, כל מי שאמר, שלא ליתן פתחון פה, תשובה למי שאמר, שלא יאמרו.**

[40] H. W. Basser makes a convincing case, for example, that the 180,000 destructive angels who kill on Wednesday and Friday (*Pesahim* 112b) are extremely veiled references to Christian bishops. See Basser, "Allusions to Christian and Gnostic Practices in Talmudic Tradition," Journal for the Study of Judaism 12:1 (1981): 90.

CHAPTER SIX

LITERATURE AS EXPRESSION OF EXPERIENCE AND THEOLOGY:

Other Considerations

I. Humor

One important element that the comprehensive polemic explanation overlooks is the humorous aspect of Rabbinic literature. Schechter says,

> The greatest fault to be found with those who wrote down such passages is that they did not observe the wise rule of Dr. Johnson who said to Boswell on a certain occasion, "Let us get serious, for there comes a fool." They did come... taking seriously things meant as a momentary impulse, individual opinion or humorous by-play.[1]

This tendency is understandable; the Rabbis did it to the Bible, and later generations do it to the Talmud. After a literature becomes canonized, the delicate balance so easily understood before closure becomes clouded. Every sentence, every word becomes equally important. Sometimes even the *Amoraim* miss occasional playfulness in *aggadic* material from an earlier era. While the Talmud explicitly admits that the prophets and Sages sometimes spoke in exaggerated terms (*Hullin* 90b), this is not the same as the genuine wit that waits for no precedent.

The following passage could have been cited as an example of God's power being limited, but the grounds given for God being constrained are too specious:

דרש ר' חמא
דמן בירי למה דוד דומה לחותר כותי אמר דוד לפני הקב"ה רבש"ע °ישועתך בי יחין [א"ל] שביקי לך ומנסתרות נקני שביקי לך גם מזדים חשוך עבדך שביקי לך אל ימשלו בי [א"ל] אי אתם דלא לישתעו בי רבנן שביקי לך[ג] ונקיתי מפשע רב *שלא יכתב סרחוני אמר לו א"א ומה י"ד שנמלתי בישרי עומד וצווח כמה שנים עד שבא יהושע והוספתי לו שנאמר °ויקרא משה להושע בן נון יהושע כל הפרשה כולה עאכ"ו

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[1] As cited by J. H. Hertz, Forward (Part II) to I. Epstein, ed., Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud (London, 1960).

> R. Dosetai of Beri expounded: Unto whom may David be likened? Unto a heathen merchant. David said before the Holy One blessed be He, "Master of the Universe, `Who can understand his errors?´" (Ps. 19:13). God replied, "They are forgiven for you."
> "`Cleanse me from secret faults.´" (ibid.)
> "It is granted to you."
> "`Keep Your servant back also from presumptuous sins´" (v. 14).
> "It is granted to you."
> "`Let them not have dominion over me; then I will be upright´ (ibid.) so that scholars may not discuss me."[2]
> "It is granted to you."
> "`And then shall I be innocent from great transgression´(ibid.) so my sins may not be recorded."
> God replied, "That is impossible. If the single *yod* which I removed from Sarai continuously cried out for many years until Joshua came and I added it to his name, as it is written, `And Moses called Oshea the son of Nun, Yehoshua´ (Num. 13:16) -- how much more so would a complete section [protest]!"[3]

This is delightful exegesis. It is, most likely, offered seriously, in order to make a point not only about models of forgiveness and repentance, but about the sanctity of text. Yet it "shatters the rigidity of literal-mindedness"[4] with its humor. The great king of Israel´s sin will be recorded for posterity, not as a warning, nor in order to humanize our heroes, but because the verses

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[2] Linking two meanings of *mashal*: 1) dominion, and 2) serving as an example (for discussion).

[3] *Sanhedrin* 107a. God changed *Sarai* to *Sarah*, eliminating the *yod*. Moses changed *Hoshea* to *Yehoshua*, adding the *yod*.

[4] S. Spiegel, introduction to L. Ginzberg´s Legends of the Jews in J. Goldin, ed., The Jewish Expression (New Haven, 1976), 152.

would be offended if they were excised. In other passages cited in the previous chapter, it is very possible that humor also played a role. God's response to Honi, for example, could have been intended as a tease, as if saying: be careful what you wish for! Here is some rain for you -- oh, you want more? Are you sure?! (*Taanit* 23a, see above pp. 48-50). Another possible expression of similar irony is the passage in which the Heavenly Academy consults Rabbah bar Nahmani (*Baba Metzia* 86a, see above p. 67), who has announced himself the unique authority regarding leprosy and tents. This statement gets him in a lot of trouble, as he must die first in order to render his opinion.

Although open jesting and ridicule were forbidden,[5] except when directed at *avodah zarah*, there are humorous remarks and jesting criticisms aimed at various factions within the Jewish community. Yohanan b. Zakkai's comment that he is like a noble before the King, while Hanina b. Dosa is like a servant, seems like a gentle jest at the expense of the charismatic miracle-workers (*Berakhot* 34b, see above p. 110). He does, after all, request b. Dosa's assistance, and admiringly acknowledges his superior access. The miracle worker has just saved his son; a harsh criticism is unlikely. When Akiba is rebuked, told

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[5] Adin Steinsaltz, The Essential Talmud, Chaya Galai, trans. (New York, 1976), 254.

to stick to *halakha* because his *aggadah* profanes the Divine Presence and compromises the uniqueness of God, a touch of humor also seems evident: "Go back to studying the laws of leprosy and tents" (*Sanhedrin* 38b, see above p. 115). It is a refrain he hears when getting carried away in *aggadah*. While intended seriously, it is a friendly taunt -- simultaneously acknowledging Akiba as a master, even in the most complex *halakhot*. Some of the extreme literalism may also have a quasi-humorous intent. It is suggested that radical anthropomorphisms such as *shi'ur komah* (an esoteric mystical teaching which details the measurements of the Divine body) are, in effect, *reductio ad absurdum* arguments, designed to refute those who would endow God with human qualities.[6] Asking how God spends the day, and answering that the Holy One blessed be He studies Torah, sits on the thrones of justice and mercy, feeds the world, and plays with the pet monster, Leviathan -- may be similarly intended (*Avodah Zarah* 3b, see above pp. 80-1). It would not imply God's knowledge is incomplete, nor that God operates within the boundaries of time. The passage does not represent a theological threat if its portrayal of God is deliberately so far beyond normative beliefs so as to highlight its own absurdity. Rather, it reinforces

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[6] J. Dan, as noted in Gedalia G. Stroumsa, "Forms of God: Some Notes on Metatron and Christ," Harvard Theological Review 76:3 (1983): 276, note 37.

the normative conception of the Deity. This rather unusual hypothesis is intriguing, as it envisions the Rabbis skillfully blending the ridiculous and the sublime, teaching and studying with a knowing smile. Any number of *aggadot* may have a humorous element: defeating the *bat kol*, Moses' visit to Akiba's classroom, the parables by which Moses and the Rabbis blame God for the people's sin, etc.[7]

Even the most serious subjects, such as human suffering, are discussed with a grain of salt and wit. In the passage dealing with chastisements of love, Yohanan goes to visit Eleazar, who is ill and weeping (*Berakhot* 5b, see above p. 93). Not about suffering in this world, nor about possibly not earning reward in the next, but about the ephemeral nature of Yohanan's legendary beauty -- well, that is certainly worth weeping about, R. Yohanan readily agrees. This is serious exegesis, but it lives in the land of fable and parable. The image is drawn of two men who know suffering, given to tears about something that is truly tragic; yet the reader will see something humorous as well. The next section details R. Huna's problems, as his wine turns into vinegar. He, too, rejects this suffering, claiming that he has not sinned. After promising to correct a

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[7] *Baba Metzia* 59b, *Menahot* 29b, *Berakhot* 31b-32a. See above pp. 68-9, 34-5, 42-5.

possible infraction, he is rewarded. Some say his vinegar does not turn back into wine, however. Have no fear -- the price of vinegar shoots up! There may also be a humorous irony in the fact that many of the Rabbis who proclaim the virtues of chastisements of love -- when they are not ones suffering for such adoration -- immediately disclaim their own sufferings and forgo the reward.

Still, it is the mixing of wit with "God-talk" that may be most surprising. One would expect there to be restrictions on flights of fancy in the sphere of the Holy. The humorous aspects represent a refusal to take the sacred with unqualified seriousness, yet they do not negate the earnestness of the Rabbis' faith or of their religious endeavor. They do not even necessarily vitiate the seriousness of the ideas expressed in the *aggadot*.

> To speak of humor as a profanation of the sacred is not to identify it simply with the sphere of the profane, nor with a weakening of faith, but to see in it an interlude, half-playful, half-serious, which takes place in a zone between the sacred and the profane, and which has its own validation within the religious encounter.... Seriousness is the prerequisite and ground of humor; it is the precondition apart from which humor would be reduced to cynical contempt. Especially is this true in the religious sphere where humor exists in the context of faith; if it ever dissolves this completely, it dissolves itself.[8]

Within the context of faith, humor heals, communicates,

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[8] M. Conrad Hyers, "The Comic Profanation of the Sacred," Holy Laughter (New York, 1969), 23-4.

and draws souls together -- even the souls of humanity and the Holy One of Blessing. It becomes another way of worshipping God.

The intimacy with God expressed in many of these *aggadot* reveals other vital aspects of Biblical and Rabbinic Judaism. B. Gemser uses the law-court pattern as the model in outlining several of these elements. First he notes that the law-court pattern may well be based on earlier pagan models, with one major innovation: God can be the defendant. Gemser's conclusions regarding this phenomenon include: it indicates a frame of mind manifesting a highly personal approach to individual and collective fate. It reveals a radical monotheism, cast in an I-Thou relationship. Israel's own genius and vivacity of mind, especially relating to spiritual experience, are also demonstrated; Gemser speculates it may be related to the innate disposition of the Semitic mentality. In addition, it reveals the non-systematic thinking of Biblical and Rabbinic theology. God is a personality, not a system. Gemser also suggests an idea mentioned above (cf. above, pp. 89-90), that *hutspa k'lapei shamaya* communicates an ethical normative conception of God, relating to the world in a Divinely-instituted moral order. The order of things cannot be

disturbed with impunity, even by God.[9] These points will be taken up in turn.

II. I-Thou Relationship

The Thou in the I-Thou relationship is sometimes expressed in very graphic terms. It may not suggest limitation of Divine power, but it certainly is suggestive:

אוי לה לאומה שתבוא בשעה
שהקב"ה עושה פרון לבניו מי מטיל בהתו
בין לביא ללביאה בשעה שנזקקין זה עם
זה

> Woe to the nation that interferes when the Holy One blessed be He accomplishes the redemption of His children, who would throw a garment between a lion and lioness when they are copulating.[10]

God is not just a premise, the One who created the world and revealed Torah. God is more than presence, whether in the Temple or in every place where two people earnestly study Torah. God is more than a Person to whom one can address prayer. God emerges as a historical personality and social being, a friend, a lover.[11] There are alternative ways in which God's love for the people could be expressed. Yet this statement captures the

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[9] B. Gemser, "The *Rîb*- or Controversy-Pattern in Hebrew Mentality," in M. Noth and D. Winton Thomas, eds., Supplements to Vestum Testamentum III: Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East (Leiden: 1955) 136-7. Also cited in Laytner, "*Hutspa K'lapei Shamaya*," 3-4.

[10] *Sanhedrin* 106a.

[11] Neusner, The Incarnation of God, 4-5.

magic of the Talmudic approach: it is humorous, and still revealing. It tells of the passionate, unbreakable attachment of a people and its God. It tells of the audaciousness such intimacy affords.

III. Folkloristic Elements

Even though "many fantastic ideas should be considered free play of imaginative fancy or the product of popular faith,"[12] this very freedom teaches about the religion that thrives on it; the stories of popular faith on which it is partially nourished teach about the imaginations they captured. Even a story that is "just made up" reflects historical reality -- that of the teller. The making of tales is an event that occurs within history, and the ways in which foreign and/or fanciful notions are incorporated into the literature and utilized by the Rabbis reflect some of that genius and vivacity of which Gemser spoke. Rather than censor ideas, the Rabbis co-opt them.

> For while there is the most authentic and mature kind of thinking on all the main topics of life present there, on God and man, on time and event, on suffering and the future, it is present in an atmosphere or medium of freedom and unconstraint, not as a set of propositions to be soberly argued in the schools; but rather as themes and images to guide and influence the listener in all the workings of his mind, and still to retain the fluidity of a story, as of the myths to which Plato resorts when

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[12] Julius Guttmann, Philosophies of Judaism, David W. Silverman, trans. (New York, 1964), 33.

> his themes outdistance his concepts. In this way...the audacities without which there is no greatness of thinking achieve room and possibility of expression.... With this important reservation or qualification one can say that the Midrash is a repository of a Jewish Theology and of a Jewish Philosophy of History...strange labels as they may be for the living tenderness of Jewish experience.[13]

Imaginative fancy and popular faith become part of the Jewish spiritual experience.

There are, indeed, palpable traces of pagan myth within the Talmudic legends, especially those related to Biblical narratives. The fact that they seem to clash with the Biblical legacy, or with the absolute monotheism generally promoted by the Rabbis, supports the notion that they are not originally Jewish. Rather, they had captured the folk imagination. Now that the ancient gods are safely dead, the Rabbis prune them, shaping them to serve the one God instead of idols. Louis Ginzberg and Shalom Spiegel identify elements such as the angelic opposition to humanity's creation, the sun and moon's disobedience toward God, the Prince of the Sea[14] and

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[13] Henry Slonimsky, "The Philosophy Implicit in the Midrash," Hebrew Union College Annual 27 (1956): 236-7.

[14] *E.g.*, *Arakhin* 15a. When God tells the Prince of the Sea to cast the Egyptians out on dry land, he balks, basically accusing God of demanding back a gift. God promises him a greater prize and, after securing the Kishon brook as collateral -- the Prince accedes. This passage fits in with other challenges cited in the previous chapter: God seems unable to cast the chariots out without the Prince's help or permission, and God deigns to bargain with him in order to secure his cooperation. It is either effective blackmail, or a Divine admission that the Prince has a good case.

Leviathan as clearly deriving from ancient mythic influence.[15] These foreign elements have a unique power when they are retold by the teachers of the Synagogue, refuting

> the pagan creeds and dualist heresies which had given birth to these very myths.... On the lips of the later heirs, these myths are made to unsay their disturbing infidelities or subversions, and to assert with poetic vigor and imagination the verities and sincerities of the biblical religion.[16]

The ability to absorb foreign influences and envelop them within authentic Jewish theology is, arguably, the spark of ingenuity that helps keep the faith alive for so many centuries. If, on occasion, "the pristine power of the original tales prevails over the later censor or editor," it may lead to a statement or image that simply cannot be explained within the frame of reference of the Rabbis, such as the belief that powers other than God have a stake in man, and that God must reckon with them (as with the Prince of the Sea, cf. footnote 14).

Also, there were some who took aspects of these teachings more seriously than others. A group of Jewish gnostics, for instance, tried to combine mystical and mythic teachings with more traditional Jewish concepts, staying within the religious community of Rabbinic

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[15] Louis Ginzberg, On Jewish Law and Lore (Philadelphia, 1955), 63. Spiegel, Introduction to Legends of the Jews, 159ff.

[16] Spiegel, Introduction to Legends of the Jews, 161.

Judaism. As a consequence, passages that link creation to the secret powers of letters known by some people (*Berakhot* 55a), and that tell of a man creating a person from dust (*Sanhedrin* 65b) are enshrined in the Talmudic canon. These figures, as well as Satan, the Prince of the Sea, the Heavenly Court, etc. appear as challenges to God's absolute authority and power.

> Such accidents of derailment or backsliding, annoying perhaps to the humorless theologian, will please the folklorist and instruct the student of history. They bespeak not only a hospitality of the mind, open to all winds of doctrine, but call attention ever again to the basic incompatibility of myth and monotheistic religion.
>
> The legends of the Bible, growing from grass roots of folklore, and groping to be engrafted, or at least entwined in Scripture, attempt the seemingly impossible: to impart vitality, without impairing the purity of the biblical faith.[17]

They desire to spiritualize mythology, using already powerful symbols to make their point.

IV. Non-Systematic Thinking

Such an approach is not unrelated to the tendency to understand texts in a multitude of ways. There are different levels: literal, interpretive, allegorical, etc. In addition, not even the literal understanding is limited to a single exposition. Somehow, these were seen as all fitting together within a single religious framework, for God's word is "like a fire...and a hammer

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[17] ibid., 161-2.

that breaks rock into many pieces" (Jer. 23:29, *Sanhedrin* 34a). It is as if there is an "assumption of a hidden all-pervasive unity of the text -- not as ontological sameness but as simultaneous coexistence of various related and constantly proliferating meanings."[18] Indeed, as Neusner points out, the volumes of Talmud are called *masechtot*, a term derived from textile weaving. It conjures up an image of many individual threads, opinions, being woven together into a single vision.

Yet this implies that the strands are all nicely coordinated, with a smooth weave. It is not that simple, because the reality it reflects is not that simple. People in search of answers for their own life, or seeking to develop systematic Rabbinic theologies, generally overlook the often dialectical nature of the Talmud. Along with an increasingly philosophic approach to God, there is an array of vividly anthropomorphic portrayals of the Almighty. Even though submission to God's will is assumed, there is the law-court argument. The desire for retribution in this world is contrasted -- or balanced -- by emphasis on the world-to-come. Abraham is a model of faithfulness, and a foolish old man. Along with the notion that God alone brings redemption, is the

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[18] Susan Handelman, "The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory;" as quoted by William Scott Green, "Romancing the Tome: Rabbinic Hermeneutics and the Theory of Literature," Semeia 40 (1987): 149.

idea that Israel can somehow effect it. God will appear at the head of Israel, yet God is everywhere. God labored to create the world, painstakingly gathering the dust from the earth -- or God did it effortlessly, with breath alone. God is wholly Other, yet binds phylacteries. One affirms God's justice through passive acceptance, or perhaps through challenge -- challenge that is an affirmation because it expects God to rectify injustice.

One can attribute elements of this dialectic to the Rabbis' desire to elicit maximum meaning from the sacred texts. It forces them to play devil's advocate, to present the dark side of heroes and the potential of villains. It invites them to explore the reaches of piety, even as it becomes rebellion.

Max Kadushin puts forward a fairly comprehensive, plausible explanation of these contradictions; he relates them to experience, which does not generate systematic theology, but scattered theological reflections. They find expression in prayer, in sermons, in exhortations against heresy or promoting righteousness, at the deathbed of a friend or teacher, and in confirming an article of faith which is forced to articulation by the struggles in the heart of the people Israel. They are determined by the character of the Sage and the exigencies of the moment. Given the passage in *Sanhedrin*

103a, for instance, where God forgives Manasseh even though it necessitates deceiving God's own rule of justice, the Rabbis strive to define the experience of *middat harahamim*, the experience of God's benevolence, love, mercy. When Moses is punished for accusing God of not redeeming the people, and is sentenced to die before entering the Promised Land, they teach about the experience of God's justice: precise and exacting. Moses does not believe in the redemption, so he will not fully experience it. These experiences, when repeatedly explored, develop into "value-concepts." *Middat harahamim* and *middat hadin* are two such value-concepts. The Talmud will dwell on one doctrine rather than another, when necessary. The Rabbis may discuss religious ideas without spinning creedal principles. At times, certain concepts will modify or qualify others, as they combine for varied and unpredictable results. Kadushin calls this "organic thinking," the hallmark of an organismic mental complex being the variety of thought patterns, opinions. The concepts are never defined; they serve more as categories, into which different determinate meanings, by different personalities, at different times, can be organized.[19] This point is a key

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[19] Kadushin, The Rabbinic Mind. He develops a rather complex set of notions of auxiliary ideas and sub-concepts, which seem to contradict his assertion that Rabbinic thinking is not systematic or hierarchical. This thesis focuses on the broader outline of his approach.

element in considering the analysis of any group of Rabbinic texts. If one extends organic thinking not only to the whole of the literature, but to the sayings of each generation, school, or individual, then it is very easy to accept inconsistencies. The text becomes fluid; it becomes more difficult and perhaps less important to determine the historical detail that contributes to this delicate balance. Instead, the focus is on a developing theology.

V. Experience and Theology

This approach, then, asks the most important question one can about God concepts: what is the Rabbis' experience of God? God will, at times, not appear omnipotent or omniscient. Although God is "supposed" to be these things, as part of God's otherness, sometimes these will be compromised to concretize the almost palpable experience of God's justice or love. God will, at times, not seem benevolent or just, and this can be expressed in an *aggadah*. Each tale is an independent unit which makes a particular event significant. The ability of each *aggadah* to stand on its own would imply that one can make a point about God's justice, for instance, without there being any ramifications regarding God's authority or power. The tales flow together, however, bringing with them the overall consciousness of

God.

Each *aggadah* is a self-expression of experience, demanding seriousness and acceptance. Kadushin cites the example of R. Yohanan, who offers an interpretation that seems unlikely and extravagant to a student; the student does not believe his teacher until he sees it for himself. Yohanan chides him for his skepticism.[20] This passage brings in the strength of tradition, and how it affects individual experience. The student could not depend solely on his own experience, but also on that of his teachers, and on the collective memories of the people.

> Religious Experience may be characterized as Jewish when it flows from the context of historic Jewish experience, i.e., when the response is from one Jewishly conditioned, and furthermore, when the experience is consciously confronted with, tested and controlled by the broad aspects of Jewish tradition.[21]

Thus, in many instances, the Sages work to reconcile conflicting theologies, seeking some sort of conformity or consistency that will validate all of them. In the process, they highlight the contrasts. How is it that God is just and the righteous suffer? How is it that God is mighty and wickedness seems to prosper?

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[20] *Sanhedrin* 100a, *Baba Batra* 75a. Kadushin, The Rabbinic Mind, 134-5.

[21] Eugene Mihaly, "Religious Experience in Judaism," p. 20. Address delivered at the International Conference of the World Union for Progressive Judaism, 1957.

While their answers are not univocal, neither are they utterly unconstrained:

> Rabbinic interpretation is definitely within a sealed sphere of reference, constituted of rabbinic practice, ideology and discourse, and most importantly, the community of sages themselves.[22]

Experience and theology are not separate -- one interprets experiences according to what one believes is true and what one prays must be true. Their experience of God, then, will certainly be colored by prevailing attitudes. What they choose to emphasize and what they choose to compromise will be guided by already established beliefs, in addition to their personal style and circumstances.

The last of Gemser's points can now be addressed, adding to the earlier discussion: the existence of an ethical normative conception of God, relating to the world in a Divinely-ordained moral order. It is one of those theological underpinnings, coloring the way one experiences life. For this reason, The Jews of Rabbinic times had to reconcile the experience of injustice with the idea of a God who is just, and the experience of

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[22] William Scott Green, "Romancing the Tome: Rabbinic Hermeneutics and the Theory of Literature," 164. Rabbinic consistency is not our own, however. While modern scholars can look at the medieval preoccupation with systematization or with the absolute transcendence of God, and recognize that these concerns are out of place in Rabbinic thought, we probably continue to exact meanings from the Rabbinic text that are inappropriate.

their own power with the idea of an all-powerful God.

VI. Covenant as a Key to Paradoxes

A. Moral Responsibility and Autonomy

The key to unlocking these paradoxes is to recall another tenet of faith: the existence of an ongoing covenant between God and Israel, mutually and inescapably committed to each other. The covenant unites Israel and God in a moral partnership. Israel must keep God's commandments, but God must also be righteous and just, planting the Divine-human encounter squarely in the field of ethical responsibility. Adonai is the Creator and Guarantor of the moral order to which God and Israel are **both** forever bound. For each partner to be morally responsible, each must have autonomy, personal authority. Thus humanity is endowed with real power, and the ultimate paradox emerges: God is omnipotent yet we have free will.

> Rabbinic theodicy, which is predicated upon the divine, moral causation of all events, in which man is also a free moral agent, carries with it the warmth and intimacy of a personal God who is the author of justice in the world. But it also bears the sign of strain. The moral dialogue... can -- and often does -- emerge as a clash of forces.
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> Consciously or not, Jewish justification of God's ways are torn between two ideas that they wish to maintain equally: the sovereignty of God and the dignity of man.[23]

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[23] Harold Schulweis, "Suffering and Evil," in Abraham Millgram, ed., Great Jewish Ideas (Clinton, Mass. 1964), 211.

The Talmud questions God's omniscience and omnipotence in order to affirm the knowledge and power of humanity. It questions God's justice and mercy in order to affirm the moral judgement of humanity and to be an advocate of Israel's welfare. God, who becomes the Thou of the covenant, must allow for protests to be hurled from below in order to affirm Israel's status as a moral agent. Faith in the God who works to infuse the world with blessing still shines, yet it meets a reality full of pain, suffering and evil. It is to change this reality that God calls Israel, and that **Israel calls God**.

It is, perhaps, the greatest testimony to the strength and inviolability of the covenant that it withstands such challenges. In fact, as the examples of Hosea and the patriarchs demonstrate (*Pesahim* 87a-b, *Shabbat* 89b; see above pp. 54-6), God invites and expects them. Along with the privilege to claim moral equality with the Almighty, comes a responsibility to assert their voice. The mutuality of humanity compels it on earth: those who do not protest are not wholly righteous (*Shabbat* 55a, see above p. 29). The mutuality of the covenant compels it even against God.

B. Ethics of Protest With Covenantal Relationship

"Once it is realized that protest is an imperative of piety, then piety demands training in the art of

protest."[24] There is an ethic to protest, to keep it far from the realm of heresy. First, the challenge must be addressed toward God; there is no equal or higher power for appeal. They must cling to God, even against God. Secondly, one may defy, but not deny. A Talmudic passage that accuses Adam of being a heretic supports the indictment with two possible proofs: Adam tried to hide signs of circumcision, denying his relationship to God; or he was a *kofer b'ikkar* who denied God entirely -- an atheist.[25] *Hutspa k'lapei shamaya* is not heresy, because it seeks to deepen the encounter with God.

Belden Lane suggests that the encounter is, in fact, the true aim of the challenge:

> A righteous individual's argument with God -- calling upon God to be faithful to God's Word, speaking out of the agony of defeat and from within the circle of the family of faith -- found as much release in its expression as it sought deliverance in its hearing. Its ultimate goal was not miraculous intervention, but intimacy with God.[26]

While this may be stretching the point, there is ample testimony within the Talmud that one should not pray with the expectation that God is obliged to fulfill the prayer. Although such impudence is one of three sins which no one escapes even for a day, it will lead only to

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[24] Reuven Kimelman, "The Rabbinic Ethics of Protest," Judaism 19:1 (1970): 49.

[25] *Sanhedrin* 38b.

[26] Lane, "*Hutspa K'lapei Shamaya*: A Christian Response to the Jewish Tradition of Arguing with God," 581.

heartache.[27]

Yet it seems that several of the prominent "rainmakers" and others certainly expect results. When Nakdimon b. Gurion takes out a loan in order to provide the pilgrims to Jerusalem with water, he expects that God will provide enough rain to repay it. When the deadline approaches, he prays for rain and receives it. That is not sufficient, however; he also needs the sun to reemerge so that the lender cannot insist that it is already the next day, too late: "Make it known that You have beloved ones in Your world." It is his prayer for rain, however, that sheds light on the surprising license he takes: "Master of the Universe! You know that I have not done this for my honor nor for the honor of my father's house, but for Your honor."[28] This is the proper motivation for protest, for God's sake and the sake of the people Israel (which, in turn, augments God's honor). Even Hannah, who obviously argues for her own fulfillment, couches her argument in terms which connect God's reputation with her plea (*Berakhot* 31b, see above p. 41). This motif is evident in many of the *aggadot*.

These challenges also share a more fundamental

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[27] *Berakhot* 32b, 55a, *Baba Batra* 164b.

[28] *Taanit* 20a. It sounds very much like R. Gamaliel's rationale for excommunicating R. Eliezer, even though the latter was only defending God's law (*Baba Metzia* 59b).

motivation; they are launched from the edge of the abyss, in despair and desperation. They are not employed in statutory public prayer, but rather serve as a mode of communication of last resort. "Adversity may wring from the heart the kind of outcry which, in more settled moments, would be considered outside the boundaries of normative theology."[29]

Not everyone, it seems, has the same license or access. Although a wide variety of challengers are recorded in the passages presented above, it is also clear that righteousness affords a special intimacy with God. Merit is a part of the ethic of protest. R. Ilfa and Rav, both extremely effective "rainmakers," are asked wherein lies their special merit. Ilfa claims that he made it possible for people in his remote and poverty-stricken town to have wine for *havdalah* and *kiddush*. Rav claims that he teaches young children, rich and poor, and makes them eager to learn.[30] Perhaps because these people seem to embody the Torah, they exercise some of its power. By dedicating their lives to furthering God's will, their own will begins to merge with the Divine. The Rabbis also emphasize this criterion of merit by so frequently choosing models of piety as their Biblical

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[29] Jakob J. Petuchowski, Theology and Poetry (Boston, 1978), 89.

[30] *Taanit* 24a.

spokespersons.

The final element in the ethic of protest is that only those who assume God's justice and power to be absolute can challenge; it is reserved for the faithful. Were they to believe otherwise, they would call into question the very essence of God. Their assertion of moral autonomy and power does not, because God has voluntarily bound God's Self to the covenant.

C. Omnipotence and Omniscience Redefined

With Noah, God pledges to regard the sanctity of life even above the moral order. With Abraham, God pledges to help his descendants whether God wants to or not. With Moses and Israel, God pledges to keep all of these elements in balance, with the active involvement of the people. From these acts of Self-limiting derives God's perceived imperfection. Why cannot God simply resolve human history, effecting universal salvation?

> God's election of a people as the bearer of revelation is the choice of a human restriction of God's ownself. To the extent that this people is faithful, God's revelation augments and develops; to the extent that Israel is unfaithful, revelation is thwarted and diminished, so to speak. Yet God will not overpower the people and act unilaterally. God chooses, rather, to live with this choice and so to collaborate with a human partner in achieving the fullness of redemption.[31]

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[31] Maureena Fritz, "A Midrash: The Self-Limitation of God," Journal of Ecumenical Studies 22:4 (1985): 708.

Having enfranchised humanity with free will, it cannot be revoked. Granting freedom only about things that do not matter is merely a shadow of freedom, a hoax. In order to firmly establish the covenant, in order to truly empower, there can be no threat of taking it back.

The Men of the Great Assembly believe that God's Self-limiting is a demonstration of power (*Yoma* 69b, see above pp. 65-6); the binding covenant is consonant with this notion. Yet there is another level of interpretation possible. It is a sophisticated, if not completely articulated conception of power and knowledge. The ability to empower -- this is omnipotence. The ability to teach so well that the student "surpasses" the Teacher -- this, paradoxically coupled with infinite knowledge, is omniscience. The God of justice and mercy teaches Israel of these Attributes so they may imitate them, augment them, and even preempt them. "My children have defeated Me; My children have defeated Me" (*Baba Metzia* 59b, see above pp. 68-9) is the joyful cry of a parent as the children learn to spread their wings and fly.[32]

That God is the kind of good father who is pleased

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[32] The child-parent relationship is developed in many ways, including several discussions that conclude the people of Israel are called "children of God," even when they are disobedient (*Kiddushin* 36a, *Baba Bathra* 10a). This principle confirms that the covenant, the relationship, is irrevocable (at times as a direct refutation to Christian claims of supersession).

> when his children show their independence of him is...characteristic of Judaism, which regards the object of human life as being the fulfillment of human possibilities, not as self-negation and self-annihilation before God. And the power of independent decision on the part of the rabbis is simply a sanction for the working-out of God's Word in human life.[33]

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[33] Hyam Maccoby, Judaism on Trial (E. Brunswick, N.J., 1982), 36.

CHAPTER SEVEN

RECURRING THEMES IN LATER LITERATURE

Hutzpa k'lapei shamaya neither starts nor stops with the Babylonian Talmud. The dynamic tension of Divine-human encounter continues to invite it as theology meets history, and the creative scope of Jewish literature continues to allow it. Later collections of *midrashim* are rife with examples of arguing with God, of taking issue with God's power and justice. It is perhaps most interesting, however, to examine the phenomenon within other types of Jewish literature as they developed, and to see how the themes and motifs are heavily influenced by earlier lore. Boldness against Heaven continues to be grounded in Biblical and Talmudic tradition.

I. Piyyutim

Aaron Mirsky argues that liturgical poems, known as *piyyutim*, indeed have their origin in the Talmudic age. Other scholars concur, and date some of the earliest *piyyutim* from the second century C.E.[1] Even if the historical connection is not so direct, the thematic connection is clear. Eleazar Kallir, one of the earliest known *payyetanim* (possibly sixth century), writes:

> As You saved Israel in Egypt, together with
> Yourself,
> When You went forth to save Your people,
> So save now.

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[1] Aaron Mirsky, *Reshith Hapiyyut* (Jerusalem, 5725), 47, as cited in Jakob J. Petuchowski, Theology and Poetry (Boston, 1978), 14. Petuchowski includes a succinct discussion of current scholarship on the origins of the *piyyut*.

As You have saved the nation and its God,
Sought out for God's salvation,
So save now....
As You have saved the stock which sang: `And He saved,'
Distinguished by its Deliverer so that He Himself was saved,
So save now.
As You have saved by uttering: `And I will bring you out,'
Which is explained: `With you, I shall be brought out,'
So save now....
As You have saved the congregation You sent to Babylon,
For their sake, God of mercy, Yourself You were sent there,
So save now.[2]

In this liturgical creation, he depends on the Talmudic passages that suggest God was exiled with Israel. For example:

> To every place that Israel was exiled, the Divine Presence went with them. They were exiled to Egypt and the Divine Presence was with them, as it says, "Did I reveal Myself to the house of your father when they were in Egypt" (I Sam 2:27). They were exiled to Babylon, and the Divine Presence was with them, as it says, "for your sake I was sent to Babylon" (Isa. 43:14).[3]

Kallir borrows language and word plays from the many instances of such texts. Here, he takes for granted the Rabbinic emendation of Isaiah 43:14: "I sent" (*shalachti*) to "I was sent" (*shulachti*).

Passages dealing with Divine sorrow and

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[2] Eleazar Kallir, "God, Save Yourself and Us!" as cited and translated in Petuchowski, Theology and Poetry, 90-93.

[3] *Megillah* 29a.

participation in Israel's exile, which were cited above,[4] play a vital role in portraying God's empathy with the people. Kallir capitalizes on this motif as he composes a hymn to recite before God in yet another age of hardship and exile. This suffering God is still a saving God, but also in desperate need of redemption.

An additional explanation for the prolonged suffering of Israel could be, as it was in the Talmud, that God is exercising tremendous Self-restraint -- fully capable of redeeming the people, yet temporarily silencing the Attribute of Mercy. A *piyyut* by Isaac bar Shalom boldly begins by citing a radical Talmudic emendation relating to such restraint, and then goes on to insist that now -- after the Second Crusade (1147) -- is the time to act:

> There is none like You among the dumb,
> Keeping silence and being still in the face of those who aggrieve us.
> Our foes are many; they rise up against us,
> As they take counsel together to revile us.
> `Where is your King?' they taunt us.
> But we have not forgotten You nor deceived You.
> Do not keep silence![5]

In the school of R. Ishmael, it was taught that "Who is like You among the gods" (*elim*) could be understood as

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[4] See, *e.g.*, *Berakhot* 3a, 8a, 59a, *Sukkah* 52b, *Megillah* 29a, *Hagigah* 5b, *Sanhedrin* 46a (above, pp. 74, 98).

[5] Isaac bar Shalom, "There is None Like You Among the Dumb," as cited and translated in Petuchowski, Theology and Poetry, 74-80.

"Who is like You among the dumb" (*illemim*). The Talmudic passage frames this startling concept by introducing it: "Who is like You, mighty in Self-restraint," and then goes on to explain how God effects the Divine will nonetheless.[6] The later *payyetan* captures attention by launching his prayer with this phrase, and leaving out the details. "Dumb" takes on a more ambiguous, and even bolder, implication.

The shock that God would refuse to save, even in the face of such meaningless suffering, is overwhelming. A liturgical poem which is still included in some *Rosh HaShanah* prayerbooks expresses a similar consternation:

> O do take a look at the righteousness of Your servants,
> ...O heavens, why did you not go black,
> O stars, why did you not withdraw your light,
> O sun and moon, why did you not darken in your sky?
> When in one day one thousand and one hundred pure souls were slain and slaughtered!
> Oh the spotless babes and sucklings, innocent of all sin,
> Oh the innocent lives!
> Wilt Thou hold Thy peace in the face of these things, O Lord?[7]

In addition, this *piyyut* invokes the vain hope, as did the sun and moon in *Sanhedrin* 110a,[8] that there should be some correlation between the Divinely ordained physical

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[6] *Gittin* 56b. Cf. above p. 66, footnote 13.

[7] As cited in Shalom Spiegel, The Last Trial, Judah Goldin, trans. (New York, 1967); 18 (note 4), 20.

[8] See above, pp. 25-6.

order of the universe, and the ethical order (or disorder) as enacted by humanity. How can the world continue, without blinking any one of those shining eyes, in the face of such cruelty and suffering?

Both of the above poems gently imply that God owes Israel immediate redemption, a motif also captured in Talmudic *aggadah*. The "rainmakers" are especially enthusiastic about such a tack. Either to prove God's infinite mercy or to demonstrate the merit of Israel, they demand answers to their prayers. R. Hiyya b. Luliani, for instance, argues that God owes Israel rain because they accepted the Torah.[9] Judah Halevi brilliantly adapts this idea, expressing his expectation for forgiveness within a poem rich in subtle, yet powerful Biblical imagery.

> Your cov'nant's sign they proudly bear,
> As with You the old pact they share;
> And, from their mother's womb still fresh,
> Your signet's cut into their flesh.
>
> Their tokens You may show to all
> Whose eyes upon Your people fall.
> To their garb's corners, four to match,
> They faithfully the cords attach.
>
> Inscribed is this at whose behest?
> Discern now; have the truth confessed;
> Who may the signet's owner be?
> And who can claim the cords from me?
>
> Then marry her as once before
> Not to divorce her as of yore.
> And let arise her sun's bright light,

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[9] *Taanit* 25a, see above p. 51.

Putting her shadows to the flight.[10]

Using phrases from the Torah, Halevi invokes Israel's faithfulness to the *mitzvot* of circumcision and *tzitzit* as merit for forgiveness and eternal redemption. Though the language of the poem is gentle, the tale from Genesis which it parallels transfigures it. Israel represents Tamar, the daughter-in-law of Judah, who is forced to humiliate herself in order to make Judah fulfill his familial obligation. The signet, cords and staff which he gives her, after she prostitutes herself with him, become her surety. God becomes Judah, who in the Biblical story is compelled to admit in the end, "She is more righteous than I." In the poem/parable, circumcision is the signet, *tzitzit* the cords, and God's unspoken confession must be: I have wronged Israel, who is more righteous than I.

No longer is the poem a plea for salvation to the All-Merciful; rather, it insists that Israel is entitled. It becomes *hutzpa k'lapei shamaya* in the tradition of all the best heroes of Israel, who confront God on behalf of the people.

Yet it should be noted that these are, as in the Talmud, the exceptions. Most *piyyutim* are composed of

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[10] Judah Halevi, "The Day the Deep Sea Turned," as cited and translated in Petuchowski, Theology and Poetry, 65-8.

pious devotional material. The exceptions are fascinating precisely because they are unconventional, even if steeped in Jewish tradition. Halevi himself seems to qualify the seriousness of certain *aggadic* notions, such as the suggestion that God went down into Egypt. In Kuzari, he has the Rabbi explain it to the Khazar king in homiletical fashion: it is designed to confirm the belief that the descent of Israel was commanded by God, and not the workings of human beings or chance.[11]

A common concern, as the God of Israel becomes identified with the God of the philosophers in the Middle Ages, is any indication of anthropomorphism or anthropopathy. On this score, Maimonides takes issue with the *payyetanim*:

> This kind of license is frequently taken by poets and preachers or such as think that what they speak is poetry, so that the utterances contain such rubbish and such perverse imaginings as to make men laugh when they hear them, on account of the nature of these utterances, and to make them weep when they consider that these utterances are applied to God, may He be magnified and glorified.... You know the extent of the sin of him who makes vituperative utterances against what is above [hurls words against Heaven].[12]

Ibn Ezra also criticizes some of the *piyyutim*, saying

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[11] Isaak Heinemann, ed. "Kuzari," in Three Jewish Philosophers (New York 1969), 105. It is not certain that Halevi is completely sympathetic with the Rabbi's point of view.

[12] Moses Maimonides, The Guide of the Perplexed, Shlomo Pines, trans. (Chicago, 1963), 141-2.

that prayer should be literal, not containing mystery or parable, not subject to a variety of interpretations.[13]

Recognizing that *piyyutim* tend to rely on Biblical and Talmudic references to Divine form or pathos, Jewish medieval philosophers extend their concern back to the sources from which the Rabbis and poets cull their material. Maimonides rationalizes and philosophizes the *aggadah* in *Sanhedrin* 38b, which mentions that God always consults the Heavenly Court before making a decision. He insists that the angels represent the Active Intellect, not a body of beings separate from God. For God to need consultation would be an unacceptable compromise of God's perfection. The Talmudic notions of God's sorrow and empathy would, most likely, meet equally metaphorical explanations.[14] Maimonides is only one among many who seek to rationalize those aspects of the tradition they find embarrassing or illogical.

Not only the encounter with Greek philosophy, but also the continuing encounter with Christian authority, forces medieval Jewish leaders to narrow the theological validity of Talmudic *aggadot.* For instance, the Paris disputation in 1240 charges the Talmud with blasphemies against God. Cited texts include those claiming God

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[13] Petuchowski, Theology and Poetry, 6.

[14] Moses Maimonides, The Guide of the Perplexed, 263.

grieves over the exile, God's prayer that Divine mercy overcome Divine wrath, and the entire episode regarding R. Eliezer, the Rabbis, and the rejected *bat kol*.[15] The Jewish "defenders" of the Talmud in this disputation and others insist that no *aggadah* has to be accepted literally.[16] Since poetic and figurative language is common in the Bible, including anthropomorphic God-imagery, these tales could not be blasphemous. Although this defense of the Talmud is grounded in serious theology, not desperate rationalization, there are many within the Jewish community who continue to read *aggadot* and *piyyutim* with literal, historical acceptance.[17]

While pressures from inside and outside the Jewish community may continue the tension surrounding *hutspa k'lapei shamaya* in its various forms, they do not weaken its expression.

> ...On the whole, the protests of Maimonides and those who thought like him have been of no avail. Liturgical poems expressing the unconventional and the idiosyncratic continued to share the same prayerbook pages with formulations of the generally accepted and conventional notions of Jewish

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[15] *Berakhot* 7a, *Baba Metzia* 59b; see above, pp. 81-2, 68-9.

[16] Hyam Maccoby, Judaism on Trial, (East Brunswick, N.J., 1982). Such a principle is expressed by some Jewish authorities from the Gaonic period onward, but it seems to gain more emphasis in the context of the disputations.

[17] Jakob J. Petuchowski cites the seventeenth century example of Haham Zevi Ashkenazi as a notable spokesman for the literalist school. See The Theology of Haham David Nieto (New York, 1954), 101.

> theology. The conventional and the unconventional shared the same pages of the prayerbook as they had always shared the same pages of the Talmud and of the Midrash, where no uniformity of theological positions was ever enforced nor ecclesiastical control of religious feelings intended.[18]

The imagery and fluidity of poetry give it a flexibility similar to that in the *aggadah*. Thus, it becomes an especially appropriate medium for expressing many of the theological tensions of existence. The posture of challenge in relation to God is not heresy when couched in poetic form. In fact, they "continue to be rehearsed... by multitudes of unsuspecting pious who would be utterly shocked to discover the true intent of their authors."[19]

II. Hasidic Tales

Hasidism continues this grand tradition of juxtaposing the normative and the radical, and the movement gives rise to great controversy over its style and theological content. Although the Hasidim do not seek to create literature, as do the *payyetanim*, there is a vast treasure of Hasidic tales left to us from its beginnings in the eighteenth century. Again, there are striking similarities to many of the Talmudic passages cited in earlier chapters. As with the medieval

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[18] Petuchowski, Theology and Poetry, 5.

[19] ibid.

synagogue poets, the Hasidic rebbes pick up on many of the earlier methods and motifs, but they do something else as well: they seem to reestablish the sense of dialogue with the Deity evident in Rabbinic *midrash*. Because Hasidism stresses great piety and a devoted passion in clinging to God, the leaders indicate that they, too, are intimate with Heaven as were the Biblical and Rabbinic heroes. Recorded in the stories of their prayers, of their assaulting Heaven with words, occasionally are answers from God.

Many of them recount God's obligations, due to Israel's merit or to the Divine law[20], and demand payment. By quoting history and God's own law on behalf of individuals and of the people, they force God to alleviate some of the suffering in this world. One of the most vociferous advocates was Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev:

> From the moment You concluded a covenant with your people, You have consistently tried to break it by testing it; why? Remember: at Sinai You walked back and forth with Your Torah like a peddler unable to dispose of his rotten apples. Your Law, You offered it to every nation and each turned away contemptuously. Israel alone declared itself ready to accept it, to accept You. Where is its reward?[21]

As with the *piyyutim*, this tale is built around a common Rabbinic *midrash*: God offered the Torah to all the other

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[20] Understood to include the Written and Oral Torah.

[21] Elie Wiesel, Souls on Fire, Marion Wiesel, trans. (New York, 1972), 109-10.

nations, and they refused.[22] There and in this story, Israel is considered exceptionally meritorious for accepting God's yoke. R. Levi Yitzhak dares to frame it with an image of God looking to get rid of damaged goods -- not because it reflects his attitude about Torah, but in order to emphasize the covenant commitment. Israel is entitled to redemption, but even if they were a bunch of rotten apples, God must reward them now.

> The Berdichever rabbi ascended the pulpit before *Neilah* and addressed these words to God:
> "Our sages have taught that whoever quotes a passage in the name of him who said it, brings redemption to the world. Therefore, since I quote: `*And God said*: I have pardoned according to your words,' You must pardon us and bring redemption to the world."[23]

> On a Rosh Hashanah that coincided with the Sabbath, Rabbi Levi [Yitzhak] made this appeal to God:
> "Master of the Universe! Today is the New Year when You inscribe the Jews either in the Book of Life or in the Book of Death. Today is also the Sabbath. As it is forbidden to write on the Sabbath, how will it be possible for You in inscribe the Jewish people for the coming year? There is only one course open to you. If You will inscribe them for a year of life, it will be permissible for You to write, as `the obligation of saving a life supersedes the Sabbath laws.'"[24]

Here, like Hannah, Gabriel, and the angels within the

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[22] See, for instance, *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael, Masekhet Bahodesh, Parasha* 5.

[23] Philip Goodman, The Yom Kippur Anthology (Philadelphia, 1971), 119.

[24] Philip Goodman, The Rosh Hashanah Anthology, (Philadelphia, 1973), 143.

Talmudic text[25], R. Levi Yitzhak invokes Jewish law with the assumption that God must abide by it as well. They demand that God uphold the Divine word. In the earlier *aggadot*, this tactic is immediately effective. The Berdichever rebbe may secure forgiveness for his congregation, but redemption of the world is yet to come.

The Hasidic rebbes seem to be most effective in their contentions with God when they formally charge the Almighty in a *din Torah*, a Jewish legal dispute. Acting as plaintiffs on behalf of Israel, the rebbes sue God, who becomes the defendant. The judges gather, hear the case, and render a verdict -- which assumes all parties are bound to obey the ruling.

> A terrible famine once occurred in Ukraine and the poor could buy no bread. Ten Rabbis assembled at the home of the "Spoler Grandfather" for a session of the Rabbinical Court. The Spoler said to them:
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> "I have a case in judgment against the Lord. According to Rabbinical law, a master who buys a Jewish serf...must support not only him but also his family (*Kiddushin* 22). Now the Lord bought us in Egypt as his serfs, since He says: "For to Me are the sons of Israel serfs" (Lev. 25:55), and the Prophet Ezekiel declared that even in Exile, Israel is the slave of God. Therefore, O Lord, I ask that You abide by the Law and support Thy serfs with their families."
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> The ten judges rendered judgment in favor of the Spoler Rabbi. In a few days a large shipment of grain arrived from Siberia, and bread could be

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[25] *Berakhot* 31b, *Sanhedrin* 44b, *Baba Batra* 11a; see above pp. 40-2, 47, 52. Cf. above, pp. 89-90.

bought by the poor.[26]

They actually convict God of injustice. God's obeisance to the court's ruling is reminiscent of the Divine deference to Rabbah bar Nahmani's unique authority in the matter of leprosy and tents, and to the ultimate submission to the Rabbis' authority in the argument with R. Eliezer and the *bat kol*.[27] Since there is Talmudic precedent for God's involvement in Rabbinic deliberations, and for God being accused of certain injustices, one can imagine the development of bringing God to a *din Torah*. Biblical figures such as Job, too, seek to make God stand trial. Charges against the Almighty are also brought privately, as they are by Abraham, Moses and others who feel that justice is not being served.

> After Yom Kippur the Berdichever called over a tailor and asked him to relate his argument with God on the day before. The tailor said:
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> "I declared before God: You wish me to repent of my sins, but I have committed only minor offenses: I may have kept left-over cloth, or I may have eaten in a non-Jewish home, where I worked, without washing my hands.
>
> But Thou, O Lord, hast committed grievous sins: Thou hast taken away babies from their mothers, and

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[26] J. Rosenberg, *Tifereth Maharal*, as cited and translated by Louis I. Newman, The Hasidic Anthology (Northvale, N.J., 1987), 56.

[27] *Baba Metzia* 86a, *Baba Metzia* 59b; see above pp. 67-9. The Koznitzer Maggid uses the latter text directly, in arguing with God about who must take the initiative in repentance: humanity or Deity. See Newman, The Hasidic Anthology, p. 56, for the hasid's clever use of God's own words in the debate.

> mothers from their babies. Let us be quits: mayest Thou forgive me, and I will forgive Thee."
>
> Said the Berdichever: "Why did you let God off so easily? You might have forced Him to redeem all of Israel."[28]

R. Levi Yitzhak himself does not hesitate "to remind God that He too ha[s] to ask forgiveness for the hardships He inflicted on His people. Thence the plural of Yom Kippurim: the request for pardon is reciprocal."[29] If God needs to atone for making the moon smaller in the Talmudic *aggadah*,[30] certainly there must be atonement for the vastness of human suffering.

God's failure to sustain the people in comfort and security not only serves as grounds for accusation, it also alleviates human responsibility. As Elijah blames God for turning the hearts of the people backwards, as R. Alexandri insists that God created the circumstances that lead to sin[31] -- the Hasidim, too, lay the blame for their own sins at God's feet. The Savraner rebbe demands pity, even when they transgress, because God knows that they do so only because their needs are not met. If they could sustain themselves, or if God would sustain them,

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[28] I. Ashkenazy, *Otzroth Idisher Humor*, as cited and translated by Newman, The Hasidic Anthology, 57.

[29] Elie Wiesel, Souls on Fire, 107.

[30] *Hullin* 60b, see above pp. 82-3.

[31] *Berakhot* 31b, *Berakhot* 17a; see above p. 42.

they would not transgress in their dealings.[32] Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov vindicates the blasphemies of a poor woman whose children all died in their infancy:

> "The poor woman is justified.... Through what cause has she earned so harsh a punishment? Why should her children die in their infancy? Were they not received into the Covenant of Abraham? Why does the Holy One, Blessed be He, chastise her so cruelly and incessantly?"

The rebbe is so certain that her cause is just, that God must listen, he promises her a healthy son and it comes to pass.[33]

In calling God to account, the Hasidim boldly compare God's behavior to humanity's, and dare to suggest that it does not reflect well on the Deity:

> Said the Sassover: "As we believe in Thee, O Lord, though we see Thee not, so aid us, though Thou seest no good within us."[34]

> [R. Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev] said: "When a Jew sees *t'fillin* on the ground, he runs to pick them up and kisses them. Isn't it written that we are Your *t'fillin*? Are You never going to lift us toward You?"[35]

Yet this, too, is in the Talmudic *aggadah*. Zion calls upon God to be gracious, at first accusing the Almighty of both forsaking and forgetting her -- something a human

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[32] Israel Berger, *Esser Ataroth*, as cited and translated by Newman, The Hasidic Anthology, 58.

[33] Chaim Bloch, *Priester der Liebe*, as cited and translated by Newman, The Hasidic Anthology, 57-8.

[34] I. Berger, *Esser Tzachtzochoth*, as cited and translated in Newman, The Hasidic Anthology, 58.

[35] Elie Wiesel, Souls on Fire, 110.

husband would never do.[36] The simple acts of faith and kindness which people do -- why cannot God be at least this gracious, Israel consistently needs to ask. The necessity of asking, of challenging God, is perceived not simply as a human compulsion; rather, as in the Talmudic examples wherein God requires Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Hosea to stand up for the people even in the face of Divine wrath,[37] it is the Divine will.

> A poor man came to the Radviller Rabbi and complained of his poverty. The Radviller had no money to give him, but, in lieu of a donation, he comforted him with the words of the verse (Prov. 3:12): "For whom the Lord loveth He correcteth [*yokhiach*]."
>
> His father, the Zlotzover Maggid, witnessed this and said to his son: "Truly this is an unworthy way to aid the indigent. The verse should be understood thus: 'For he that loveth the Lord shall argue with Him.'[38] He should plead: 'Why shouldst Thou cause a man to put himself to shame by begging aid, when it is in Thy power, O Lord, to vouchsafe him his necessities in an honorable fashion?'"[39]

God's response in the face of a valid challenge is expected to be as portrayed in the Talmud: "The Holy One Blessed be He decrees, and the prayers of the righteous annul." Divine deference to Israel is not shameful; rather, God laughs and says, "My children have defeated

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[36] *Berakhot* 32b, see above p. 30.

[37] *Shabbat* 89b, *Pesahim* 87a-b; see above pp. 54-6.

[38] *Yokhiach* can mean "correcting, arguing, punishing, admonishing."

[39] A. Kahan, *Atereth ha-Zaddikim*, as cited and translated in Newman, The Hasidic Anthology, 57.

Me."[40]

> Said the Lizensker: "We read in the hymn chanted in the Sephardic ritual: `The grace and the triumph to the Immortal One.´ This means: it is a grace to God that His Tzaddikim overrule Him."[41]

So the *tzaddikim* use their powers to force God's hand. One can sense some connection to Talmudic passages which record efforts to force God's hand; Honi standing in a circle until God sends rain remains one of the most vivid examples. In fact, R. Levi Yitzhak copies this approach quite closely. In his famous "Kaddish," he threatens not to move from a given spot until God makes an end of the exile.[42] Y. L. Peretz, in "A Golden Chain," dramatizes a Hasidic rebbe forcing God to bring the Eternal Sabbath by refusing to recite havdalah. "Let the Sabbath not cease to be! Singing and dancing we shall go to Him, we shall stand before God's throne! O, we do not pray, we do not beg; we say to him, `Longer we could not Wait!´" Just when it seems that God could yield to the rebbe's decision, a Jew enters the room and greets the others, "*Gut woch*" (good week). The spell is

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[40] *Moed Katan* 16b, *Baba Metzia* 59b; see above pp. 58, 68-9.

[41] I. Berger, *Esser Tzachtzochoth*, as cited and translated in Newman, The Hasidic Anthology, 134.

[42] Nahum N. Glatzer, A Jewish Reader (New York, 1969), 94-5.

broken.[43] Had this not happened, could it be that God would truly submit to their enthusiasm and impatience, bringing redemption before its time? Is this any different than God needing to be protected, lest the simultaneous prayers of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob accomplish the same thing?[44]

Yet the Hasidim go beyond the traditional arguments. With less focus on learning than the Talmudic rabbis, less grounding in theology than the *payyetanim*, the emphasis on folkloristic elements grows. The Hasidim seem to take even greater freedoms. They add a unique flavor to the arguments, daring to use unconventional threats or innuendos to make their point. One radical addition to the Hasidic repertoire in confronting God is the incorporation of a kabbalistic notion that God is yet incomplete, needing the service of humanity to bring about Divine perfection. While such a daring concept may have been indicated in certain *midrashim* with full awareness of its problematic implications, it becomes a significant element in the sixteenth century system of Isaac Luria, and is adapted by the Hasidim.[45] In a

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[43] Cited in Immanuel Olsvanger, Contentions with God (Cape Town, 1921), 35-6.

[44] *Baba Metzia* 85b, see above pp. 76-7.

[45] The teachings of Isaac Luria and other kabbalists had a significant impact on Hasidism, which adapted and adopted a variety of theological conceptions. Some of the kabbalistic literature, such as the Zohar, also

somewhat light tone, the idea that God needs Israel is communicated in this Hasidic tale:

> While reciting the Selihot prayers, the Sassover Rabbi exclaimed: "O Lord, consider that Thou perforce must need that Israel should sin for the fulfillment of Thy thirteen attributes which are like thirteen gems in 'Thy Crown.' Otherwise Thou wouldst lack some of Thy most precious gems: 'Long-suffering and Forgiving Iniquity' (Ex. 34:7), and Thy Crown would lose much of its glory. Thus, even by their sins the children of Israel contribute to Thy glory, and they deserve to be treated with clemency."[46]

A second, radical Hasidic innovation: the rebbes occasionally warn that the traditional relationship between God and Israel may be damaged or destroyed. In the following *din Torah*, the Lizensker rebbe "suggests" that perhaps the solution is for God to break the covenantal bond with Israel by releasing them from service of the Almighty.

> The Emperor of Austria promulgated a law that a tax of 400 guldens be levied on every Jewish marriage. A poor man came to the Lizensker and complained: "I have a case in judgement against God. He commanded that men multiply, and yet he permitted a decree which makes marriage impossible for most Jews. My daughter is betrothed, but neither I nor the bridegroom can pay so enormous a tax."
>
> The Lizensker pondered a moment, and then exclaimed: "Let the Dayyanim sit in judgment." In his argument he said: "It is the law that if a man is half-serf and half-free, his master must give him his freedom in order that he may be able to marry, since a Jew may not wed a female serf, and a Jewess

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contains material related to this thesis. For a general discussion, see Moshe Idel, Kabbalah: New Perspectives, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.

[46] I. Ewen, *Fun Rebe's Hauf*, as cited and translated by Newman, The Hasidic Anthology, 58.

> may not be given in marriage to a male serf (Gittin 41). We are partly serfs of God, and partly free-men because of our free-will. It is because we are serfs that the decree has been directed against us Jews only. Let God, Our Master, either free us from this decree, or else give us freedom from our service to Him, so that we may marry as other nations may."
>
> Soon after a messenger arrived with the joyful tidings that the harsh decree had been abolished.[47]

While the above example seems to suggest such a notion sarcastically, R. Levi Yitzhak threatens a more limited, yet more ominous and serious breach:

> If You refuse to answer our prayers, I shall refuse to go on saying them.

He remained standing at his pulpit from morning till night without moving his lips.[48] Despite such public outbursts, R. Levi Yitzhak is never seriously accused of blasphemy, for he speaks as do the Biblical and Talmudic heroes: always toward God, and on behalf of humanity.

Paradoxically, even these challenges are designed to affirm God's sovereignty and justice, as they do in the Talmud and in synagogue poetry. The pain forces them to cry out, and the covenantal relationship allows it. The *aggadah*, the *piyyut*, the tale give them a voice.

> From its very beginnings,... the function of the Hasidic tale was to restore order and to mend the broken lines of communication between man and his fellow man, and between heaven and earth, at a time

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[47] S. G. Rosenthal, *Hithgadluth ha-Zaddikim*, as cited and translated by Newman, The Hasidic Anthology, 58-9.

[48] Elie Wiesel, Souls on Fire, 108.

and place when faith and prayer failed.[49]

And again, these stories tell only part of the story. There are numerous tales which recount God's infinite mercies, which glorify in Divine perfection and emphasize the need for trust and devotion. There exist Hasidic tales that seek to explain some of the suggestive Talmudic passages, as if the ideas contained therein are too radical and challenging to let stand. The Baal Shem Tov, for instance, suggests that Akiba's horrible death was in fact a blessing. While the *aggadah* in *Menahot* 29b let Moses' protest go answered but not explained, the BeShT says it was necessary for Akiba to be purified of all his sins, so he could immediately attain Paradise. The BeShT justifies God's ways instead of indicting them.[50] Another rebbe interprets the Talmudic passage in which God prays for Divine mercy to overcome Divine justice to mean: May Israel return to God so as to cause compassion to triumph -- objectively -- over the Attribute of Justice. It is not that God must pray in order to effect some change in the Divine mood.[51] Yet another suggests that the Talmudic Rabbis who reject

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[49] Yaffa Eliach, Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust (New York, 1982), xix.

[50] Newman, The Hasidic Anthology, 4.

[51] ibid., 386.

their "chastisements of love" can do so, not because there is broad approval for challenging Divine decrees; in their case, the afflictions are interfering with the higher value of Torah study.[52]

Since they answer these challenges, only to propose new ones, it seems likely that Hasidism (like medieval Jewish poetry) continues to address theology through the sometimes disconnected fragments of experience. While God is a "merciful and compassionate Being against Whom mortals can render judgement" if they feel heartlessly afflicted, at moments Hasidism also communicates a faith "traditionally in line with the pristine Jewish concepts of God, the soul, and their communion."[53] The continuing encounter with God must address all of its aspects.

III. Twentieth Century Jewish Literature

As might be expected after surveying the *hutspa k'lapei shamaya* that grew out of various periods of hardship and suffering, most of the twentieth century material that is appropriate to this thesis deals with community and national disaster and destruction. While there is a vast literature which seeks to qualify and explain, to expand and adapt Jewish theology, it is still the myth, the story, and the poem that speak most

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[52] ibid., 485.

[53] ibid., lxxxvi.

directly of the human experience. Certainly there are theological treatises in this age which qualify as challenging God's justice and power; modern Jews have grown uncertain about which attributes to attribute to God. Yet it is modern *aggadah* that most clearly connects with the Rabbinic tradition of *hutspa k'lapei shamaya.*

A. Early Twentieth Century

Hayyim Nahman Bialik represents one of the most powerful voices of the early part of the century. Steeped in Jewish learning and exposed to the literature of history and of his time, he spoke in a new voice -- yet in the language and images of the ages. "The Scroll of Fire" offers these images of the God of Vengeance, after causing the Temple to be destroyed:

> And they opened the windows of the firmament
> And inclined their heads full toward the Temple Mount
> To see if the Temple doors were opened
> And if the cloud of incense smoke ascended.
> And they saw, and behold the Eternal, the God of Hosts,
> Ancient of Days, sitting in the morning twilight over the desolation!
> His garment was a pillar of smoke
> And His footstool dust and ashes;
> His head bowed low between His arms
> And mountains of sorrow on His head....
>
> And God no longer could restrain Himself.
> And the Eternal awoke
> And roared like a lion and smote His hands together,
> And the Shekinah arose from over the ruins

And went into hidden places.[54]

The pain of the suffering seems to cause a heaviness of limbs. In anguish, God roars like a lion and smites hands together. These images are borrowed from Talmudic glimpses of the empathic God, suffering with Israel.[55]

Bialik's generation has its share of catastrophes visited upon the Jewish community, and the poet is compelled, like his ancestors, to meet and confront God in the tragedy. One of his most challenging poems is written after his visit to Kishniev in the wake of the 1903 pogroms. Directed by the Historical Commission in Odessa to prepare a report on the atrocity, he is moved to compose two poems: "Upon the Slaughter" and "In the City of Slaughter." In the latter he renews the eternal human shock engendered when the moral universe is shattered, and the physical world simply carries on:

> The perfumes will be wafted from the acacia bud
> And half its blossoms will be feathers,
> Whose smell is the smell of blood!
> And, spiting thee, strange incense they will bring--
> Banish thy loathing -- all the beauty of spring,
> The thousand golden arrows of the sun,
> Will flash upon thy malison;
> The sevenfold rays of broken glass
> Over thy sorrow joyously will pass,
> For God called up the slaughter and the spring
> together, --

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[54] Hayyim Nahman Bialik, "The Scroll of Fire" (trans. Ben Aronin), The Complete Poetic Works of Hayyim Nahman Bialik, Israel Efros, ed. (Philadelphia, 1948), 158-9.

[55] *Berakhot* 3a, *Berakhot* 59a, *Sanhedrin* 46a; see above pp. 74, 98.

The slayer slew, the blossom burst, and it was sunny
weather!...
Tomorrow the rain will wash their mingled blood
Into the runnels, and it will be lost
In rubbish heap, in stagnant pool, in mud.
Its cry will not be heard.
It will descend into the deep, or water the cockle-
burr.
And all things will be as they ever were.[56]

The sun and moon, too, have to banish their loathing as they go forth to shine upon an idolatrous world against their will.[57] Even God's horror will not cause the skies to darken, will not interrupt the Divinely ordained order of the universe. Could it be, Bialik suggests, that the spoiler has come upon the Almighty as well, who is too weak to respond?

Forgive, ye shattered of the earth, yours is a
pauper-Lord!
Poor was He during your life, and poorer still of
late.
When to my door you come to ask for your reward,
I'll open wide: See, I am fallen from My high
estate.
I grieve for you, my children. My heart is sad for
you.
Your dead were vainly dead; and neither I nor you
Know why you died or wherefore, for whom, nor by
what laws;
Your deaths are without reason; your lives are
without cause....
For great is the anguish, great the shame on the
brow;
But which of these is greater, son of man, say thou?
Or liefer keep thy silence, bear witness in My name
To the hour of My sorrow, the moment of My shame.
And when thou dost return
Bring thou the blot of My disgrace upon thy people's

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[56] Bialik, "The City of Slaughter" (trans. Abraham M. Klein), The Complete Poetic Works of Hayyim Nahman Bialik, 129-131.

[57] *Sanhedrin* 110a, see above pp. 25-6.

head,
And from My suffering do not part,
But set it like a stone within their heart![58]

One can juxtapose the Talmudic passage which portrays God, *kiv'yakhol*, standing naked and ashamed alongside Tzafenat,[59] yet Bialik's Lord seems far more impoverished and powerless. Divine empathy here offers little comfort. Simultaneously evoking and transforming the traditional motifs, Bialik threatens to explode the very theology out of which they grew. This is the ever-constant tension in modern Jewish literature's twist on *hutzpa k'lapei shamaya*. Still, even this pauper-Lord demands that the people at least cry out. At the very least, Heaven should still stand for justice, and the martyrs cannot go silently, willingly to their graves assuming it is God's will.

Is it, then, possible for shattered limbs to sin?
Wherefore their cries imploring, their supplicating
din?
Speak to them, bid them rage!
Let them against me raise the outraged hand, --
Let them demand!
Demand the retribution for the shames
Of all the centuries and every age!
Let fists be flung like stone
Against the heavens and the heavenly Throne![60]

The Divine-human relationship, the ethic of protest is still intact. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Hosea, the

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[58] Bialik, "The City of Slaughter," 137-8.

[59] *Gittin* 58a, see above pp. 71-2.

[60] Bialik, "The City of Slaughter," 139.

Zlotzover rebbe, and the victims of Kishniev must all speak out.

B. Post-Holocaust Literature

1. Challenges the Injustice

This "*mitzvah*" continues to command, even after the fires of the Holocaust consume so much of Jewry and Judaism. The following quotation is not from a formally published "story," yet it is one survivor's story, and therefore speaks of experience, as do the *aggadot* of the ages.

> ...I find I want very much to keep after Him and try to the best of my ability to overcome the obscurity of His ways and I can't escape Him, however much He may have wished to escape us. I will do this to my last breath. I know it. More than this, I believe this is precisely what a Jew must do, to keep after Him for answers. And it brings me a measure of repose and comfort to conduct these conferences, to be God's interlocutor, to keep after Him by creating and inventing, like the traditional Jew of the past in history, new arguments *against* Him, and new justifications *for* Him. For me it is the entire Torah....[61]

Elie Wiesel, called by some "the Job of Auschwitz" for his incessant confrontation with the traditional God of Israel, uses his masterful voice to echo the psychological benefit of calling God to account: "This day I had ceased to plead. I was no longer capable of lamentation. On the contrary, I felt very strong. I was

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[61] Reeve Robert Brenner, The Faith and Doubt of Holocaust Survivors (New York, 1980), 98.

the accuser, God the accused."[62] Later, he contemplates what has driven the Jewish voice to challenge God over the centuries:

> Why was Moses so attached to life, to the point of opposing God's will? Was that his way of protesting heaven's use of death to diminish, stimulate and ultimately crush man? Was it his final act on behalf of his people?... Did the most inspired and fierce prophet of all wish by his example to tell us, through centuries and generations to come, that to live as a man, as a Jew, means to say yes to life, to fight -- even against the Almighty -- for every spark, for every breath of life?[63]

While Wiesel paints a frightful image of God's motives, he still addresses the ethic of protest as did the Talmudic Rabbis. With consuming faith in God and a passionate commitment to the welfare of the people, Moses -- and those who choose to lead -- challenge God. They must challenge to defend the sanctity of life. So it is, after the Holocaust sought to destroy life and its sanctity, that Wiesel and a chorus of other voices cry out, even against God. At least one calls God to a *din Torah*. Scene: The eve of *Tisha b'Av* in the Rema synagogue in Cracow, 1979.

> Just as we were about to recite Lamentations, Miles Lerman, a former partisan and the sole survivor of a large family, stepped forward to the center of the synagogue, walked up to the beautiful bimah with its magnificent ironwork, banged on the table, and announced that he was calling God to

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[62] Elie Wiesel, Night, Stella Rodway, trans. (New York, 1960), 73.

[63] Wiesel, Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends (New York, 1976), 201-2.

a *Din Torah*, summoning God to court. Without further ado, Miles started to speak in English, stating his grievances against the accused.

"God! How could you stay here when next door are Auschwitz and Plaszow? Where were you when all over Europe your sons and daughters were burning on altars? What did you do when my sainted father and mother marched to their deaths? When my sisters and brothers were put to the sword?"[64]

2. God's Guilt

Another suit picks up the complaint of Elijah, R. Alexandri and the Savraner rebbe,[65] the eternal refrain: but is it not Your fault we sin? How then are we guilty?

And if we sinned --
After all, we were fashioned out of clay
O Lord,
On whom then are You taking revenge?

From the head adorned with T'fillin
A banner for the nations
Blood drips from its straps --
How can You look at it?
How come You have dispersed us in the world
Like sheep for the slaughter...?
We are suing You
Almighty --
For having sent us into the world,
Implanted in us a healthy instinct for life
And then handed us over to the slaughterer...[66]

Similarly,

If another flood should come,
Let us, sisters all, from every land,

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[64] Yaffa Eliach, Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust (New York, 1982), 212.

[65] *Berakhot* 31b, 17a; see above p. 42. Cf. above, p. 170.

[66] Meir Bossak, "*Mima'amakim*," as cited and translated by Murray J. Kohn, The Voice of My Blood Cries Out (New York, 1979), 130.

Say to God in his looming tower:

Whom are you hitting? Would you smite grasses
For their grassy sins? For the crooked paths
And dark tangles to which you destined them?
For their scanty roots which push toward earth,
Remote from your face?[67]

Again, the poets take a traditional motif, and expand it. Not only is God guilty for creating us with human imperfection, but also for being so cruel as to give us a love of life alongside a destiny for cruel death. Not only is God at fault for creating us with the capacity for evil; the Divine Presence then withdraws so far away and leaves us to struggle with the chaos of human existence. Modern Hebrew poets add to the list of God's sins: indifference, or even rejoicing in cruelty.[68] Wiesel's stories accuse God of becoming "the ally of evil, of death, of murder," and then add the powerful caveat, "but the problem is not solved."[69] His characters raise the possibility that God uses humanity for entertainment and makes fun of their foibles. Perhaps God is ashamed in such Divine perversity, and that is why "no one can see Him and live."[70]

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[67] Rosa Gutman-Jasny, "If" (trans. Etta Blum), as cited in Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenerg, eds., A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry (New York, 1969), 297.

[68] See Kohn, The Voice of My Blood Cries Out, 122ff.

[69] Wiesel, The Gates of the Forest, Frances Frenaye, trans. (New York, 1966), 199.

[70] See The Accident (*Le Jour*), New York: Hill and Wang, 1962, pp. 42, 93.

The inevitable result of enumerating God's sins is to seek God's atonement. For some, it seems impossible. Framing his poem in the vocabulary of the Yom Kippur liturgy, M. Sh. Ben Meir goes on to exclaim:

> You have killed my brothers,
> You have put my sisters to death
> And You had no mercy Father of Compassion
> Not even on the babies, woe unto You!
> Woe unto me!...
> Woe unto You and me!...
> How can the shame
> Of Your pernicious destruction
> Ever be atoned?[71]

As radical a concept as it may seem in the Talmud to suggest that God seeks to atone for making the moon smaller, here God is denied atonement by man! Using the voice of R. Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, the famous intimate of Heaven, another poet is more gracious. R. Levi Yitzhak is now counted among the heroes of Israel, and so his voice speaks with the power and merit of Abraham, Moses, Elijah. In this respect, the Jewish poet writes in great Jewish tradition, relying on them to help present Israel's case before God. Still, he claims that the right to offer forgiveness and to set the prerequisites for it are in his hands. In this respect, the poet speaks in a uniquely modern voice:

> Reward Your children
> Now, and at once!
> Or,
> Admit publicly

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[71] M. Sh. Ben Meir, "*Neilah*," as cited and translated in Kohn, The Voice of My Blood Cries Out, 133.

> Before the entire congregation
> That You are bankrupt, as it were,
> That You have lost all Your potentialities
> Of divine power....
> I implore Thee, this evening
> By the light of the many memorial candles
> Tell the truth!... And we
> Will remove all Your outstanding obligations
> I, Levi Yitzhak, the son of Sarah,
> Of the holy congregation of Berdichev
> Am first to forgive...[72]

3. Humanity's Power and God's Powerlessness

"R. Levi Yitzhak" seeks to force God's hand, to demand the reward he has always believed would one day come. Like Honi who succeeds in getting rain, and like the righteous who annul God's decrees,[73] humanity continues to be drawn to images of power over the Divine will. In The Town Beyond the Wall, Wiesel develops the character of Varady, who believes passionately in human omnipotence. Revealing to the congregation his determination to defy God, he announces that he will live forever:

> He claimed that liberation from Time would be accomplished at the signal of man, and not of his Creator; the irony and beauty of it was that "each of you, the men and women who hear me, has God in his power, for each of you is capable of achieving a thing of which God is incapable!... Man is not what

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[72] Zalman Shneur, "Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichov's New Argument," as cited and translated in Kohn, The Voice of My Blood Cries Out, 120. Note that the poet uses the word *kiv'yakhol*, as it were.

[73] *Taanit* 23a, *Moed Katan* 16b; see above pp. 48-50, 58. Wiesel cites the Talmudic passage about *tzaddikim* annulling God's decrees in Gates of the Forest, p. 190.

> he does, but what he wishes!... He who stands before you will never die!"[74]

The Talmud generally attributes humanity's control over God to God's own desire to be merciful and gracious. Still, it seems gently to push against the idea of God's perfection. The small dents in God's omnipotence become, in the modern age, enlarged until they are gaping holes in Jewish theology. Images of God's suffering and imprisonment, for instance, which could earlier serve to convey God's empathy now communicate explicit powerlessness. Wiesel's character, Michael, believes the awareness of God's impotence is the key to unleashing our own power -- power over God, to be God.

> In prison, under torture, man becomes powerful, omnipotent. He becomes God. That's the secret: God is imprisoned!... Man must free him. That is the best-guarded secret since the creation.[75]

More simply, it is the destruction of the concept that God is the master of history.

> Perhaps You too are with us in the stocks?
> Perhaps it is not a children's game
> But Your impotence that
> Dragged You in with us
> Into the turbulent vortex...[76]

Is the following passage from Night a modern version of God standing with the victims even (or especially) in

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[74] Wiesel, The Town Beyond the Wall, Stephen Becker, trans. (New York, 1964), 32.

[75] ibid., 10.

[76] A. Hameiri, "*Bamaarbolet*," as cited and translated in Kohn, The Voice of My Blood Cries Out, 118.

their moment of shame and suffering, or is it a suggestion that God is so limited, humanity has killed the Deity?

> The two adults were no longer alive. Their tongues hung swollen, blue-tinged. But the third rope was still moving; being so light, the child was still alive....
>
> For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He was still alive when I passed in front of him. His tongue was still red, his eyes were not yet glazed.
>
> Behind me, I heard the same man asking: "Where is God now?"
>
> And I heard a voice within me answer him: "Where is He? Here He is -- He is hanging here on the gallows."[77]

Michael Berenbaum suggests, in a study of Wiesel's works, that

> the belief in God is killed in the human mind when the slaughter of innocence destroys the credibility of a just world. God is implicated in the death of the innocent, or perhaps God, in his omnipotent impotence, struggles between life and death.[78]

Jewish tradition, even when history and theology seem to find no meeting ground, desperately seeks to implicate God rather than assassinate God. It would have been better, after all, for Elisha b. Abuye to hurl words against Heaven rather than deny his faith.[79] Some of those who tell tales of the Holocaust continue this

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[77] Wiesel, Night, 71.

[78] Michael Berenbaum, The Vision of the Void (Middletown, CT, 1979), 45.

[79] Cf. above, pp. 88-9.

tradition. Yet again, they add a new twist. Many seek not only to castigate God, but to punish the Deity as well, to "get even."

> ...There was no longer any reason why I should fast [on Yom Kippur]. I no longer accepted God's silence. As I swallowed my bowl of soup, I saw in the gesture an act of rebellion and protest against Him.[80]

A survivor of the Sachsenhausen concentration camp gave up a single Jewish practice: the daily wearing of *t'fillin*. He sees himself as "getting even with God... for His having rejected my family and all Jews."[81]

4. Toward the Border of Heresy?

Perhaps these gestures, too, are really designed as protest to effect change. Perhaps they are part of the final, desperate effort to rescue God and themselves from annihilation. They could be, in great Jewish tradition, efforts to force God's hand. They are threats expressed in action rather than speech. Honi threatens not to move. R. Levi Yitzhak threatens not to pray. Still, there is a new, hard edge to these threats. The poet, Yitzhak Ivri, threatens not to believe:

> My faith has evaporated
> In You, and in Your
> Heavenly administration...

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[80] Wiesel, Night, 75.

[81] Brenner, The Faith and Doubt of Holocaust Survivors, 52.

> And if You are the commander
> And if You desire my fidelity
> Then augment Thy own power
> And rule over Satan...![82]

A survivor, taking note that this approach was one of two open to believers in the camps, suggests it is an idle threat.

> They are, either complete submission to God, capitulation to his enormous incomprehensible inscrutable will; or blaspheming Him, cursing Him, not really denying Him but detesting Him, despising Him, menacing Him, threatening Him, threatening to withhold faith in Him: "God if you don't do something I'm going to stop believing in you..." As though you can try to convince God that you can turn belief on or off like water from the tap....[83]

Yet as we listen to Wiesel's *tzaddik*, having travelled from this first path to the second, now on the border between faith and heresy... it does not seem a meaningless threat.

> I have never questioned Your justice, Your mercy, though their ways have often confounded me. I have submitted to everything, accepted everything, not with resignation but with love and gratitude. I have accepted punishments, absurdities, slaughters, I have even let pass under silence the death of one million children. In the shadow of the holocaust's unbearable mystery, I have strangled the outcry, the anger, the desire to be finished with You and myself once and for all.... I invented reasons, causes for rejoicing, to create a link to You and also to myself. But... but that's all over.... Do you hear? It's all over, I tell You. I cannot go on. If this time again You desert Your people, if this time again You permit the slaughterer to murder Your children and besmirch their allegiance to the

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[82] Yitzhak Ivri, "*Beyn Dam L'dam*," as cited and translated in Kohn, The Voice of My Blood Cries Out, 156.

[83] Brenner, The Faith and Doubt of Holocaust Survivors, 100.

> covenant, if this time You let Your promise become mockery, then know, O Master of all that breathes, know that You no longer deserve Your people's love and their passion to sanctify You, to justify You toward and against all, toward and against Yourself; if this time again the survivors are massacred and their deaths held up to ridicule, know that I shall resign my chair and my functions as guide, I shall fall to the ground, my forehead covered with ashes, and I shall weep as I have never wept in my life, and before dying I shall shout as no victim has ever shouted, and know that each of my tears and each of my shouts will tarnish your glory, each of my gestures will negate You and will negate me as You have negated me, as You will have negated Your servants in their dazzling and ephemeral truth.[84]

The course of events destroys the faith of even the most pious. Abraham Eisen tells the story of a cobbler and his father, who feel certain that Hitler will fall because God is the Master of history. Yet after their death and the destruction of four thriving Jewish communities, Eisen hears the voice of the cobbler in another tone:

> Suddenly my body shook. Above the howling of the wind I heard the voice of the old cobbler of Trok. It rolled over the frozen lake and whistled through the pines with a roar.
>
> *Leth din v'leth dayan!* There is no Law and no Judge![85]

Still, the path to disbelief is not easy. Even amidst denial, the charges echo the dialogue of an ancient people and their eternal God. The ancient Rabbis

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[84] Wiesel, A Beggar in Jerusalem, Lily Edelman, trans. (New York, 1970), 116-7.

[85] Translated by Moshe Spiegel, as cited in Jacob Glatstein, ed., Anthology of Holocaust Literature, (New York, 1977), 27-31.

know that history and experience do not always square with official theology; that is why they let Jeremiah and Daniel's glaring omissions of God's attributes stand.[86] Are these heresies any different? Yitzhak Katznelson, a victim of the Holocaust, in his denial of Heaven, is still seeking some physical manifestation of God's horror at the mass destruction, some link between the moral and physical orders:

> Woe, why are you so blue
> You skies of blue,
> Why are you so beautiful
> When we are being slaughtered?...
>
> A million children have they murdered
> But your heart did not move
> Nor your compassion...
> Millions of noble mothers and
> Fathers did they kill too,
> And you didn't tremble
> Nor did your skin quiver a bit...
> And you looked on...
> You certainly have no God
> Within your heavens,
> You are a deceit, you're absurd!
> You have no God within you anymore![87]

Another poet is compelled to use two voices, as do the Rabbis of old, driven by the theological complexity of the questions and the imperfection of the answers. In "The Rabbi and the Judge," the latter is crushed as he listens to his teacher and friend cry out, "There is not justice nor is there a judge!" He himself struggles even

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[86] *Yoma* 69b, see above pp. 65-6.

[87] Katznelson, "The Song of the Slaughtered Jewish People," as cited and translated in Kohn, The Voice of My Blood Cries Out, 107.

to question God's actions, for to be a Jew also means to accept God's will with love and gratitude.[88]

The line between atheism and anger remains unclear. Many professing not to believe are in reality seeking to punish God by shouting God's non-existence to the Divine face. It is, perhaps, more indicative of psychology than theology.

Even amidst rebellion, the dialogue of faith continues. In a new voice, the eternal intercessor, Elijah, speaks still:

> "...You are blaspheming," he repeated gently, as if he were envious, as if he would have liked to blaspheme as well. "God's final victory, my son, lies in man's inability to reject Him. You think you're cursing Him, but your curse is praise; you think you're fighting Him, but all you do is open yourself to Him; you think you're crying out your hatred and rebellion, but all you're doing is telling Him how much you need His support and forgiveness...."[89]

Even amidst denial, the argument with God goes on. *Hutzpa k'lapei shamaya* is still directed toward Heaven.

> "...give me the strength to sin against you, to oppose your will! Give me the strength to deny you, to reject you, to imprison you, ridicule you![90]

Those who truly reject Divinity, however, often must

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[88] Y. Sh. Schwartz, "*Harav Vehadayan*," as cited and translated in Kohn, The Voice of My Blood Cries Out, 138-40.

[89] Wiesel, Gates of the Forest, 33.

[90] Wiesel, Town Beyond the Wall, 10.

acknowledge that atheism is not necessarily a satisfactory answer either. With a brilliant, tragic sense of irony and paradox, reminiscent of God's own admission that traditional theodicies are inadequate,[91] Elie Wiesel paints several portraits of man without God. After eating his food ration on Yom Kippur in protest against a silent Heaven, he says, "In the depths of my heart, I felt a great void." The world "without God and without man" leaves one terribly alone.[92] Akiba Drumer, one of the knights of faith in Wiesel's camp, can no longer survive once he rejects God. His inner dialogue between piety and heresy, after choosing the latter, leaves him broken:

> "...I know. Man is too small, too humble and inconsiderable to seek to understand the mysterious ways of God. But what can I do? I'm not a sage, one of the elect, nor a saint. I'm just an ordinary creature of flesh and blood. I've got eyes, too, and I can see what they're doing here. Where is the divine Mercy? Where is God? How can I believe, how could anyone believe, in this merciful God?"
>
> Poor Akiba Drumer, if he could have gone on believing in God, if he could have seen a proof of God in this Calvary, he would not have been taken by the selection. But as soon as he felt the first cracks forming in his faith, he had lost his reason for struggling and had begun to die.[93]

Perhaps one needs to affirm faith in God, almost despite God, or even to spite God.

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[91] *Yoma* 69b, see above p. 94.

[92] Wiesel, Night, p. 73-5.

[93] ibid., 81.

Being a Jew means running forever to God
Even if you are His betrayer.[94]

IV. Conclusion: A Break in Tradition?

The eternal tension between confrontation and justification continues. These images are sufficiently contradictory in themselves, without having to discuss the stories and statements that arose out of the ashes of the Holocaust to justify God's ways. These "*aggadot*" serve as their own foil, communicating the spiritual perplexity so acutely felt by modern Jewry. Their reliance on the content and language of previous confrontations with God is evident. Their specific departures from these "norms," however, raise some important questions, asked more frequently than before. Often the discussion touches upon whether the Holocaust is truly a singular event within Jewish history in the depth and breadth of its tragedy, or if each destruction was felt to be such in its own age. Even if this mode of the question had an answer, it is out of the scope of this thesis. Our interest is more limited: regarding *hutzpa k'lapei shamaya*, to what degree is the new Hebrew literature continuous with the millennia of Hebrew writing that precede it? Can Jewish protest today remain within the sphere of faith?

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[94] Aaron Zeitlin, "Being a Jew" (trans. Robert Friend), Treasury of Yiddish Poetry, 318.

There certainly exists literature that is utterly disconnected, not only from ancient motifs and forms, but also from traditional Jewish theology. Every age has its heretics who, like Elisha b. Abuye, cannot find an answer within traditional modes of seeking, and cannot live with the questions. In the modern age, the door to secularism opens easily, inviting many to enter. Yet, the majority of texts cited above seem to launch their protest from within Judaism. Focusing on them, it is more difficult to define the boundaries of faith.

It is tempting to confuse tradition with theology, style with substance. Tradition serves as a unifying force. For masters like Bialik and Wiesel, suffused with Jewish learning, the tradition permeates what they write, and it resonates with the language of the historical relationship between God and humanity. But do they, and the other modern Hebrew writers like them, truly articulate the historic argument, or do they use tradition to negotiate an entirely new stance? Is the theology contained within their *hutspa k'lapei shamaya* radically different than what came before?

It is impossible to answer this question without asking first what was asked of the Talmudic *aggadot*: how are we supposed to understand these texts? Murray Kohn argues that, while the Talmud may speak primarily in homiletical terms, the post-Holocaust literature means

what it says. Whereas in the past the Jew, the poet, the victim

> spoke similar words with profuse apologies, this poetry of the last *churban* is totally free of the fetters of remorse or apologetics. It is no longer defensive. It was steeled in the fires of Auschwitz and bathed in the blood of the faithful.

He asserts that "the complexity of theological speculation has been for too long detached from a reality that dissolves the very spiritual ground from under our feet," and that modern Jewish literature finally is expressing a truer reconciliation of history and theology.[95] If these points are valid, then it is effectively disconnected from what came before.

While his thesis is intriguing, he ignores several key points. First, he downplays his own presentation of the clear tensions within and among the various post-Holocaust writings. Literature does not have to apologize, because it can use several voices simultaneously, never stating which, if any, represents the view of the author. The Talmud speaks with the mouths of many Rabbis; modern authors create multiple voices of their own. The hierarchy of modern voices is even less clear. If one tries to trace Elie Wiesel's theology as communicated through his many characters, it does not easily distill a single perspective. Rather, a chorus of voices wrestles with the theological

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[95] Kohn, The Voice of My Blood Cries Out, 140-2.

ambiguities through time, as they always have.

In addition, the new literature does not seem to be absolutely free of apologies. Akiba Drumer is but one example of those who qualify their denial before they can even state it. And after such a challenge, there is still a price to pay: the loneliness and despair of the void left in a world without belief in the traditional Jewish God.

A more significant oversight in Kohn's premise is that *aggadah*, broadly defined, has always served the purposes he lays out for post-Holocaust literature: the reconciling of faith with existence. There are two primary modes of communicating Jewish theology; one can construct systems and recite dogmas, or tell tales. Theological systems are theoretical, and they are rarely completely adequate for our existential needs. Thus, *aggadah* speaks of one's experience with God, as varied and fragmented as lives can be. *Aggadah* allows for the growth of beliefs, the balance of formal and actual assent. It allows for the creative survival of a people and its faith, building new literature, new life out of destruction. It allows for the construction of new paradigms for meaning.

Ultimately, then, all tales are both metaphorical and literal. To the extent that they represent experience, they are historical. Since they reflect only

a portion of reality, they must fit into a homiletical framework that seeks to account for existence. Images in Rabbinic *aggadot*, medieval *piyyutim*, and Hasidic tales should be understood as Berenbaum suggests Wiesel's writing should be: The images

> should be taken evocatively. Wiesel continues a long tradition within Jewish theology of dealing with the images of God in order to satisfy an existential need. His images are suggestive and, as his existential needs change, the character of his images changes.[96]

Like Talmudic *aggadah*, these images encompass all arguments and settle for none. In this way, even the most shocking images of the modern contentions with God are consonant with earlier tradition. Ultimately, continuity depends on a deeper truth, that even Kohn admits:

> The *Shoah*, to be sure, did not succeed in eradicating the divine in the Jew, and this is why our "complaint against heaven" is the star witness of our affirmation of life, of faith and of God.[97]

Ultimately, *hutzpa k'lapei shamaya* is still an affirmation. While recognizing the reality of evil and suffering, it manages to preserve sacred theodicy. Recognizing the contradictions but refusing to resolve them, *aggadah* can express ideas that rational discourse cannot. The yes and the no, the praise and the protest hold hands, and dance together.

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[96] Berenbaum, Vision of the Void, 45.

[97] Kohn, The Voice of My Blood Cries Out, 161.

And the chain of tradition is strengthened, as we reclaim these stories and retell them as if they were our own.

APPENDIX: Index of Talmudic Passages Cited

Note: **Boldface** indicates the text is cited in the original, and in translation. Other references may be to translations, summmaries, or discussion of ideas.

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