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"Mayim as Matter and Metaphor: An Exploration of Water in the Torah"

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**MAYIM AS MATTER AND METAPHOR:
AN EXPLORATION OF WATER IN THE TORAH**

**A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR RABBINIC ORDINATION**

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Percy Roth once said: "Many drops make a bucket, many buckets make a pond, many ponds make a lake, and many lakes make an ocean." That is how I feel about this thesis project. It has been a long and challenging process, filled with many scattered drops that grew to ponds that grew to lakes and that eventually evolved into the sea that is this thesis in which I've been swimming for a year! It would not have been possible without the contributing drops and soothing tides of a number of people.

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INTRODUCTION

"The trees reflected in the river are unconscious of a spiritual world so near to them."

- Nathaniel Hawthorne

Often, we are unaware of the rich spiritual potential that surrounds us; potential that confronts us in language, in imagery, in matter and in metaphor. Water contains that spiritual potential, in both daily life and sacred text. Because water is such a fundamental element of existence, it is easy to take for granted. But, as the substance mentioned more than any other substance in the Bible,¹ its significance cannot be ignored.

As its title indicates, this thesis is an exploration of water as a Biblical motif. It is a comprehensive analysis of every instance of water in the Torah, and every conceivable form of water, from dew to deluge. Although water imagery abounds throughout the Tanakh, I have chosen to limit the scope of this project to the Torah. There are, however, select references to water in the Prophets and Writings, when such references serve to illuminate or support particular Torah verses.

There are five chapters of the thesis, but they do not correspond directly to the Five Books of the Torah. There is, however, a general linear progression from beginning to end, both within each Book and throughout the Torah. This structure is designed to help the reader to remain oriented to the greater narrative of the Torah, as well as highlight the ways in which one image of water can build upon another. The project begins, naturally, at "The Beginning" in Genesis. Virtually all forms of water emerge first in Genesis, and are later repeated and nuanced in other Books. Both Genesis and Deuteronomy merit their own chapters, because each forms its own unique literary unit. The Exodus narrative (Ex. 1-

¹ Frederick Aaron Eisenberg, *Water in Biblical Literature, With Special Reference to the Hagiographa* (Unpublished Thesis, 1958), 6.

15:21) is also a distinctive literary unit, and therefore warrants a separate chapter, as well. Chapters Three and Four are oriented more thematically, dealing with the appearance of water in the wilderness and the use of water in ritual, respectively. The sub-sections throughout all five chapters distinguish water's various functions and themes, both materially and metaphorically.

The guiding questions that inspired this thesis are the following: 1) How does water function in the Torah? 2) When is water to be read literally, as physical matter and concrete reality, and when is it to be read metaphorically, as a symbol of a greater power or ideal? 3) When water appears with metaphoric potential, what does it represent and what does it inspire?

It is important to note that there are instances in the Torah when "the sea is just the sea," when water imagery literally depicts the physical entity of water. There are other instances when water is purely symbolic, representing something more abstract or ambiguous, and others still when both tangible and intangible references are possible. As Shubert Spero writes: "Given the possibility of multiple meanings in the Torah, the real problem for the religious reader is deciding when a text is to be read as having literal meaning *only*, metaphorical reading *only*, or perhaps as having meaning on both levels, with *both* having been intended by the Author."² One must decide if a given statement harbors the kind of ambiguity that gives license to a metaphorical interpretation.³

The inherently religious nature of the Torah is helpful in this regard, as it opens the door to greater metaphoric possibilities. Peter Macky writes:

² Shubert (Shlomo) Spero, "The Biblical Stories of Creation, Garden of Eden and the Flood: History or Metaphor?" *Tradition* 33, 2 (1999), 5.

³ David H. Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguities: Metaphor, Semantics and Divine Imagery* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 2.

"The biblical writers did not appeal simply to readers' rational intellects, intending only to provide ideas and arguments. Those were the foundation, but much more important was their intention to move readers, to change them, to attract them to a Lord, a community, a way of life. Thus the biblical writers often appealed to readers' imaginations, consciences and wills, trying to draw readers to explore the depths of personal and spiritual life that the biblical writers knew by their own experience."⁴

The Torah is a text that is not only literarily descriptive and legally prescriptive. It is also a text that is spiritually emotive. As such, it relies on metaphor to a greater extent to express abstract spiritual ideas. David Aaron argues that basic to all religions is "a unique experience of confrontation with power not of this world...which is outside of the normal experience and indescribable in its terms.... Simple words fail because they are limited to ideas grounded in worldly experience."⁵ There are no worldly words to describe the Divine, or even, in some cases, the nature of the human experience. Consequently, as Aaron states, religion is, of necessity, "inextricably linked to the expression of metaphor."⁶

The significance of water in the Torah, therefore, is often both physical and metaphysical. Its imagery is rich with meaning. Throughout this thesis, I will attempt to explain its concrete relevance and unpack its metaphoric potential. I will attempt to demonstrate that, for biblical writers living in an arid region where water is scarce and draught poses a constant threat to life, water can signify both life and death, blessing and affliction, order and chaos.⁷ For a community obsessed with maintaining both physical and spiritual boundaries, water "is the purifying agent par excellence...yet it is most vulnerable to impurity."⁸ And for a People engaging in a complex relationship with the Divine, water

⁴ Peter Macky, *The Centrality of Metaphors to Biblical Through: A Method for Interpreting the Bible* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), 2.

⁵ Aaron, 30.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit and Tremper Longman III, ed. *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1998), 929.

⁸ Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 119.

functions as both a symbol of the vitalizing influence of God's grace and the devastating influence of God's wrath. Throughout the Torah, water is the quintessential emblem of the nexus between life and death.

As Adrienne Rich says: "The ocean... which corresponds to the amniotic fluid in which human life begins... is unstable and threatening as the earth is not; it spawns new life daily, yet swallows up lives; it is changeable like the moon, unregulated, yet indestructible and eternal."⁹ The power of water is paradoxical, indeed. But it provides a deep well of knowledge to explore.

⁹ Adrienne Rich, U.S. poet. *Of Woman Born*, ch. 4 (1976).

CHAPTER ONE

IN THE BEGINNING: WATER IN GENESIS

"To trace the history of a river, or a raindrop... is also to trace the history of the soul, the history of the mind descending and arising in the body. In both we constantly seek and stumble on divinity, which, like the cornice feeding the lake and the spring becoming a waterfall, feeds, spills, falls, and feeds itself over and over again."

- Gretel Ehrlich

OUT OF THE DEPTHS

Water appears at the very beginning of the Torah, in the story of Creation. In Genesis 1:2, the world is described as being: "unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water."¹⁰ Here, water is תְּהוֹם, "the deep." There are several definitions of this term, but it is best known as a cosmic, abyssal ocean that envelops the earth. The text says nothing about how or when this watery mass came into existence.¹¹ *Tehom* is primordial matter, having existed before the creative process, as we know it. Because of water's amorphous nature, it becomes an appropriate representative of "the state of affairs before chaos was reduced to order and things achieved stable form."¹²

Tehom appears in relatively few places in the Hebrew Bible. We see it only 8 times in the Torah, and only 31 times throughout the entire Tanakh. Its role elsewhere may help to define it in Genesis 1. For example, at times it is personified. In both Genesis 49:25 and Deuteronomy 33:13, *tehom* "couches below" to effect blessings of bounty to Joseph. In Habbakuk 3:10, *tehom* "roars loudly" to demonstrate God's might, and in both Job 28:14 and Psalm 42:8, *tehom* speaks. *Tehom* also appears in Isaiah 51:10, which reads: "It was You that dried up the Sea, the waters of the great deep, that made the abysses of the Sea a road the

¹⁰ Unless noted otherwise, I have used the JPS English translation for all translated verses in this thesis.

¹¹ Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 6.

¹² *Ibid.*

redeemed might walk.” Here, *tehom* is a force overcome by God. As Nahum Sarna writes: “All these facts suggest that *tehom* may once have been the name of a mythical being much like the Mesopotamian Tiamat, the female dragonesque personification of the primordial salt-water ocean, representing the aggressive forces of primitive chaos that contended against the god of creativity.”¹³

Many scholars have made this connection between *tehom* and Tiamat, the ancient Near Eastern water monster, arguing that the Genesis creation story borrows heavily from other local myths. However, Genesis contains no battle scene between God and a water demon. *Tehom* is not vested with the personal qualities of will and intelligence that appear in the Babylonian Tiamat account. Rather, the Biblical *tehom* in Genesis 1 displays features of power and cosmic range capable of disrupting the divinely given order of creation without the waters themselves threatening to overwhelm God.¹⁴ In other words, the water remains subservient to God. The Biblical *tehom* may be powerful, but its power is not displayed in Genesis 1. Even though *tehom* is treated as a proper name (never appearing with a definite article), it is thoroughly demythologized.

In contrast to most other scholars on the subject, David Toshio Tsumura rejects this longstanding comparison between the two creation myths completely. He argues that the term *tehom* in Genesis 1:2 is a Hebrew form derived from the Proto-Semitic “*tiham*” – “ocean” – and usually refers to the underground water, which overflows and covers the entire surface of the earth in the initial state of creation.¹⁵ Tsumura argues that *tehom* has nothing directly to do with the Akkadian goddess Tiamat. The wide range of scholarly opinion on

¹³ Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, 6.

¹⁴ G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren and Heinz-Josef Fabry, ed. *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 275.

¹⁵ David Toshio Tsumura, *Creation and Destruction: A Reappraisal of the Chaoskampf Theory in the Old Testament* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 196.

the meaning of the vague use of *tehom* in Genesis 1 affirms that its origin is subject to interpretation. Where all of these interpretations agree, however, is in its definition as a primordial source of water.

Also in Genesis 1:2, water appears as מַיִם, which may be referring to the cosmic ocean of *tehom* that surrounds the earth, or to the water mentioned later in verses 6, 7, 9 and 10, that covers the surface of the earth. Regardless, *mayim* here is like *tehom* in that it is water that precedes the process of creation; it is primordial water. Considering the pervasiveness of water, the text presents the cosmos like a human embryo. The entire world is contained as a life system within water. And, it is through the womb-like water that the world is born.

Either as *tehom* or *mayim*, water may represent chaos that precedes order. The רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים, "wind of God," that sweeps over the face of the water may serve to establish a cosmic hierarchy. As Robert Luyster suggests, wind and water are symbols of the ultimate cosmic structure.¹⁶ Just as wind (*ruach Elohim*) hovers over water, so too, God has power over chaos.

God does not create water, but water is part of the creative process. Water appears next in the form of *mayim* in Genesis 1:6-10, which reads:

"⁶God said, 'Let there be an expanse in the midst of the water, that it may separate water from water.' ⁷God made the expanse, and it separated the water which was below the expanse from the water which was above the expanse. And it was so. ⁸God called the expanse Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, a second day. ⁹God said, 'Let the water below the sky be gathered into one area, that the dry land may appear.' And it was so. ¹⁰God called the dry land Earth, and the gathering of waters God called Seas. And God saw that this was good."

¹⁶ Robert Luyster, "Wind and Water: Cosmogonic Symbolism in the Old Testament." *Z.A.W.* 93, 1 (1981), 1-10.

In verses 6-7, God creates the sky, and separates "water from water." This separation distinguishes between the source of rain above from the water on and below the earth. In addition, according to Medieval commentator Rashi, the separation of the waters is actually a process of strengthening or crystallizing the waters in order to give them form. After all, even though the heavens are created on the first day, they are still *liquid*.¹⁷ In other words, the separation of water from water involves a sort of jelling process. As Avivah Zornberg explains, "the formless liquid primary substance finds its limits in space, solidifies, assumes its proper form."¹⁸ Because the boundaries of land have not yet been created, water remains formless, unwieldy and uncontrolled in its liquid state. In order to make space for the expanse of sky, it must, in some way, change forms. This is enacted by God's words "Let there be." Zornberg writes: "The model of coming-to-be that is suggested by Rashi's commentary here pictures a primary fluid stage, followed by the transformative thrill of God's word. There is a firming, a finding of proper place, a new density and rigor. The effect of God's word is constraint."¹⁹ Once again, this emphasizes God's power over water, and the dominance of order over chaos.

Likewise, in verse 9, water is not acting, but is being acted upon. God gathers water on the earth in order to create space for dry land. Once gathered, the water receives a new name from God, introducing "יָם" or "sea", for the first time. In each of these verses, we see that water is something that God works to contain. God asserts dominance over this primordial entity, lest one think that, because water pre-existed creation, it is endowed with

¹⁷ Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 7

power that might match or challenge God's sovereignty. The provision of fixed boundaries and channels for the waters to flow in continually robs them of their authority and power.²⁰

Because water is something that must be controlled, it again raises the possibility that water is representative of chaos. Just as God contains and organizes water, God also establishes order that controls chaos. Luyster believes this chaos is a threatening force, as he writes:

"In ancient Israel, as in other religious traditions, the sea was felt as a threat to the established cosmic and social order... The priestly author sketches his account of creation, in which the earth is at first submerged beneath the waters of the primordial ocean. In order to rescue it Yahweh must fashion a firmament above the earth in order to contain the waters above, while the waters below he restrains in one place in order that the dry land might appear (Genesis 1:6-8). Throughout the remainder of the Old Testament, however, the waters remain constantly restive, eager to reclaim dominion over the earth that they once contained and to reassert their primeval sovereignty."²¹

The unwieldy threat of water is not explicit in Genesis 1; instead, water is merely something that God continues to work with and move around. The threats of *tehom* are not yet perceptible. Later in Genesis, specifically in the Flood narrative, the dangers associated with water emerge, yet never as an opposition to God or an independent force. This well-known destructive power helps to inform the way one interprets water in Genesis 1.

The next time water appears in the text, it is far from a threat. On the contrary, in Genesis 1:20-21, water acts for the first time on its own, and does so as a creative force. The text reads: "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures (וַיִּצְרָף הַמַּיִם חַיָּים רַבִּים וְכָל חַי הָאֲרֶץ וְכָל חַי הַמַּיִם וְכָל חַי הָאֲרֶץ וְכָל חַי הַמַּיִם)," suggesting that it is water that is a source of creation. Is this a threat to God's sole creative power? Or, since the hierarchy of power has already been established in prior verses, does God feel secure enough to relinquish some creative power to the waters? Sarna argues that

²⁰ Botterweck, 275.

²¹ Luyster, 1.

"water does not here possess inherent, independent generative powers.... It produces marine life only in response to the divine command."²² This interpretation serves to maintain and reinforce God's ultimate sovereignty. Shubert Spero offers a different perspective. He says that Genesis 1:20-24 "can be understood as the consequence of the fact that God had encoded already existing elements with the ability to unfold or evolve into higher, more complex levels of life."²³ In other words, God may not create water, but God endows water with creative abilities that it did not previously possess. Despite their differences, interpreters agree on the fact that water plays a unique role in this story in that it acts as a creative force.

IMAGES OF IMMENSITY

Water appears in three more verses at the end of Chapter 1, in the form of both *mayim* and *yam*. In Genesis 1:22, God says to the living creatures: "Be fertile and increase, fill the waters in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth." Genesis 1:26 states that humans "shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth." Finally, Genesis 1:28 includes God's instruction to man and woman to "be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth." In each case, the water can be read literally, referring simply to the home of sea creatures. However, each may also be read metaphorically, as a symbol for vastness. The extent and immensity of the sea give it metaphoric weight to express grandeur or completeness.

Yam appears metaphorically elsewhere in the Book of Genesis, particularly in the language of divine blessing. In Genesis 22:17, an angel of God says to Abraham: "I will

²² Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, 10.

²³ Spero, 10.

bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous and the stars of heaven and the sands of the seashore [כְּחֹל אֲשֶׁר עַל-שֹׁפַת הַיָּם].” In Genesis 32:13, Jacob pleads with God, saying: “You have said, ‘I will deal bountifully with you and make your offspring as the sands of the sea [כְּחֹל הַיָּם], which are too numerous to count.” And, in Genesis 41:49, “Joseph collected produce in very large quantity, like the sands of the sea [כְּחֹל הַיָּם], until he ceased to measure it, for it could not be measured.” All three verses are examples of *yam*, or more accurately, the sand on the shore of the *yam*, representing a concept that is far too great to fully comprehend. As the substance that gives shape to the water, the sand has a dual purpose: to act as a boundary for the immense body of water, and to represent plentitude.²⁴

This metaphor for vastness appears elsewhere in the Torah, as well. For example, Deuteronomy 30:13 reads: “Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say: Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?” Here, the sea is not a reference to a particular body of water, but rather, it represents an immense and insurmountable obstacle. It also appears in Deuteronomy 29:9-10. These verses do not feature יָם, but rather, שֹׁאֵב מַיִם – “one who draws your water” – in reference to a person’s profession. It reads: “... your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to *waterdrawer*.” Because the “waterdrawer’s” role differs so greatly from that of the “tribal heads,” this term helps to emphasize the totality of the Israelite community.

²⁴ Deut. 33:19 also features both the sea and sand to demonstrate plentitude: “... they draw from the riches of the sea and the hidden hoards of the sand.” These images, however, are not symbolic, but rather they are concrete examples of the wealth of fish and maritime treasures that Zebulun will enjoy.

The metaphor for vastness works well in Genesis 1:22-28, because, in each of these verses, water is used in conjunction with references to the sky and the earth, all three comprising the totality of earthly life. The “waters of the sea” are not just waters in one particular ocean, but represent every body of water that ever was and ever will be, partnering with earth and sky to complete the metaphor for life as a whole.

That the sea is a significant ancient Hebrew metaphor is also exemplified by its use in later Jewish texts. For example, in the Introduction to the Soncino Talmud, Rabbi Dr. J.H. Hertz compares the Talmud to an ocean. He writes:

“The Talmud is indeed an ocean, vast in extent, unfathomable in depth, with an ocean-like sense of immensity and movement about it. Its great broad surface is at times smooth and calm, at others disturbed by waves of argument and breakers of discussion, stormy with assertion and refutation. And like the ocean, it swarms with a thousand varied forms of life.”²⁵

This confirms that *yam* has long been understood as a symbol for immensity and breadth.

Whether or not this metaphor originated in the Torah is unknown, but the use of the metaphor in Genesis is certainly its debut in Jewish tradition.

GIFTS FROM GOD

Water appears next in a rather different form in the second rendering of Creation.

Genesis 2:5-6 reads:

”וְכָל שֵׂיט הַשָּׂדֶה טָרָם וְהָיָה בְּאֶרֶץ וּכְלֵעֶשֶׂב הַשָּׂדֶה טָרָם וְצִמָּה כִּי לֹא הִמְטִיר יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים
עַל-הָאָרֶץ וְאָדָם אֵין לְעֹבֵד אֶת-הָאֲדָמָה: וְאֵדָה מִן-הָאָרֶץ וְהִשְׁקָה אֶת-כָּל-פְּנֵי-הָאֲדָמָה.”

²⁵ J.H. Hertz – Forward to the *Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud: Tractate Berakoth*, ed. I. Epstein (London: The Soncino Press, 1960), 4.

“When no shrub of the field was yet on earth and no grasses of the field had yet sprouted, because Adonai²⁶ had not sent rain upon the earth and there was no man to till the soil, a flow would well up from the ground and water the whole surface of the earth.” Here, the earth, which is created in Chapter 1, is described in greater detail as a dry and barren land. Rain – מִטָּר – had not yet been created, and though it does not appear in verse 5, it is described for the first time. Here, as Sarna notes, rain “is not conceived simply as a phenomenon of nature; it is a source of blessing to man from God.”²⁷

The use of rain elsewhere in the Torah, as both *matar* and *geshem*, affirms this notion. In Leviticus 26:4, God declares: “I will grant your rains in their season, so that the earth shall yield its produce and the trees of the field their fruit.” Similarly, Deuteronomy 11:14, reads: “I will grant the rain for your land in season, the early rain and the late. You shall gather in your new grain and wine and oil,” and Deuteronomy 28:12 reads: “God will open for you God’s bounteous store, the heavens, to provide rain for your land in season and to bless all your undertakings.”

The concept of granting rain “in its season” is both significant and specific to the Near East region. As Baruch Levine states: “In the Land of Israel, as in adjacent areas, rainfall is limited to a fixed season of the year. At other times, there is no rain for months on end. If sufficient rain does not fall at the expected time, the results are more harmful than in temperate climates.”²⁸ Therefore, people living in this region were utterly dependent upon this pattern of nature. The text indicates that God is the source of such blessing or lack

²⁶ This is a common rendering of God’s name, represented by the tetragrammaton, יהוה. Many scholars translate it as “The Lord,” but because such a term conveys masculine gender specificity, I have chosen to use the more neutral “Adonai” throughout this thesis.

²⁷ Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, 17.

²⁸ Baruch A. Levine, ed., *The JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 183.

thereof, as God could bestow rain out of love or withhold it out of anger. This is evidenced by Deuteronomy 11:17, which reads: "For Adonai's anger will flare up against you, and Adonai will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce; and you will soon perish from the good land that Adonai is assigning to you," and Deuteronomy 28:24, which reads: "Adonai will make the rain of your land dust, and sand shall drop on you from the sky, until you are wiped out." Each textual example emphasizes the fact that rain is a gift from God that is either summoned or withheld according to God's will.

Because the absence of water leaves the earth void of vegetation, one can infer that its presence brings nourishment and life. In the continuing process of creating life on earth in Genesis, God causes a flow or a mist – *ṭal* – to "well up from the ground to water the whole surface of the earth." Though *ed* is a different form of water than *matar*, both are depicted as essential, life-giving waters, presented or controlled by God.

Sarna believes that the *ed* comes from the waters of *tehom*, which would rise to the surface to moisten the arid land.²⁹ In this sense, we can view *tehom* as a reservoir that God holds in check, and which continues to have a creative, nurturing and supportive impact. Tsumura notes that the earth-water relationship in Genesis 2:5-6 is different from that in Genesis 1:2. He writes: "In Genesis 1:2, the earth was totally under the water; in Genesis 2:5-6, only a part of the earth, namely the land, was watered by the water ("*ed*"), which was overflowing from an underground source."³⁰ Thus, the water may appear in different quantities and with different intensity, but it nevertheless comes from the same primordial

²⁹ Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, 17.

³⁰ Tsumura, 196.

source. And, it is appropriate that this water should nourish Eden, the mythic garden from which much water flows.

There is an interesting parallel between the *ed* that emerges to water the land, and the beginning of human life. Genesis 2:7 provides the second description of God's creation of humanity. Here, God "formed the human from the dust of the earth, blowing into his nostrils the breath of life, and the human became a living being." While there is no water in this verse, there are connections between this verse and the one preceding it. For example, Rashi claims that the *ed* that wells up from the ground does so for the purpose of creating humanity. "The depths released a vapor that seeded the clouds and moistened the dust, so that man was created – like the baker, who adds water to his dough and then kneads it! So here, first there was a moistening and then, 'God formed man.'"³¹ In other words, according to Rashi, the creation of humanity would not have been possible if the waters had not emerged first.

In addition, just as the *ed* wells up to bring life to Eden in verse 6, here God breathes *נִפְשׁ חַיָּה* into the first human, rendering him a *נִפְשׁ חַיָּה*. Water is to the land what the breath of life is to humanity. Both initiate and perpetuate life on earth. The physical property of water as a fluid also evokes the transience of mortal life. Just as water flows, changes, and evaporates, so too, does human life evolve, change, and ultimately, end. This connection between water and mortality is demonstrated in Psalm 22:15, where the *nefesh* is poured out like water, an image for weakness and illness leading to the pronounced fear of death.³²

³¹ Zornberg, 18.

³² Botterweck, 279.

A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT

The next few verses introduce a new type of water, that of the river, or נָהָר. As we see here, and throughout the rest of the Torah, rivers are always named, indicating their significance. Genesis 2:10-14 reads:

“¹⁰A river issues from Eden to water the garden, and it then divides and becomes four branches. ¹¹The name of the first is Pishon, the one that winds through the whole land of Havilah, where the gold is. ¹²(The gold of that land is good; bdellium is there, and lapis lazuli.) ¹³The name of the second river is Gihon, the one that winds through the whole land of Cush. ¹⁴The name of the third river is Tigris, the one that flows east of Asshur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.”

The purpose of this water is stated clearly: to water the garden. However, because they flow out from Eden, the rivers also nourish the rest of the world with their life-giving waters.

The location of these rivers is subject to speculation. While the Tigris and Euphrates are well known and can be located in Babylon, the other two rivers defy authoritative identification. In I Kings 1:33, the Gihon is mentioned and located near Jerusalem. The location of Pishon is much more mysterious. Some scholars surmise that the Pishon is actually the Persian Gulf, while others contend that it is the Kuwait River. Its precise location remains uncertain.

Regardless of the precise location of these waters, the focus of the description of the rivers is the fertility they represent. They flow outward, watering and nourishing the world. It is also clear that, according to the text, God determines their purpose and controls their flow. This is yet another example of God's authority over water, of order reigning over chaos. Yet, it is also clear that God depends on water. When controlled, water plays an

essential role in the creative process. As Francis Kloppe writes: "Life on earth becomes possible when there is neither too much, nor too little water."³³

DELUGE AND DESTRUCTION

"All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was."

- Toni Morrison

When there is too much water, it can be a source of destruction, rather than creation. This is the case in Genesis 6-8, in what is known as the "Flood Narrative." The destructive force of water is first introduced in Genesis 6:17, which reads: "For My part, I am about to bring the Flood – waters upon the earth – to destroy all flesh under the sky in which there is breath of life; everything on earth shall perish." In this verse, מַבּוּל or "Flood," appears for the first time as another form of water. The structure of the verse indicates that the word was obscure and required defining. This form of water takes on a dramatically different role than that of the waters in Genesis 1-2. In fact, the waters of the *mabul* work to reverse the work of the previous waters. As Sarna states: "The Flood is a cosmic catastrophe that is actually the undoing of creation."³⁴

Several aspects of the Flood narrative support this theme of destructive reversal, as they echo the account of Creation. For example, in Genesis 1:26, God says: "...Let us make humanity in our image, after our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on the earth." In Genesis 6:7, however, God says: "...I will blot out from the earth the humans whom I

³³ Francis Kloppe, "Aspects of Creation: the Water in the Wilderness Motif in the Psalms and the Prophets." *Old Testament Essays* 18, 2 (2005), 255.

³⁴ Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, 48.

created, humans together with beasts, creeping things, and birds of the sky, for I regret that I made them.” This parallel language symbolizes a reversal of Creation.

Genesis 6:7 also presents a reversal of the second account of Creation. The word “אֶמָחֶה” is most often translated as “I will blot him out,” but another possible translation is: “I will dissolve him.” After all, the same word is used in Numbers 5:23, in which the written words of a curse and the dust of the sanctuary floor are dissolved in the “waters of bitterness.”³⁵ Because Genesis 2:7 states: “God formed the human from the dust of the earth,” the waters of the Flood act to *dissolve* the dust of humanity. As Zornberg writes: “The original dust-earth of man – his relation to the *adama* – is to be radically annulled by an over-application, as it were, of water.”³⁶

The same language of blotting out or dissolution appears in Genesis 7:4, in which God declares: “In seven days’ time I will make it rain upon the earth, forty days and forty nights, and I will blot out [מִחֲיָתִי] from the earth all existence that I created.” The seven days leading up to the destruction of the world mirrors the seven days that constitute the creation of the world.³⁷ This specified length of time also exemplifies the absolute power of God, as God can predetermine the duration of the deluge. As this verse states clearly, God has the power to reverse God’s own creative acts, to destroy all that had been created in Genesis 1.

It is apparent that the Flood brings together a variety of water sources, one of which is rain. Sarna suggests that the waters of the Flood are actually the reuniting of the two halves

³⁵ Num. 5:23: “וְנָתַב אֶת־הָאֲלֹת הַפֶּהֶן בְּסֶפֶר וּמָחָה אֶל־מִי הַמָּרִים” – “The priest shall put these curses down in writing and rub it off (dissolve it) into the water of bitterness.”

³⁶ Zornberg, 39.

³⁷ Gen. 2:2: “On the seventh day God finished the work that [God] had been doing, and [God] ceased on the seventh day from all the work that [God] had done.”

of the primordial waters that are divided in Genesis 1.³⁸ In the Creation narrative, God separates the waters above from the waters below. In the Flood narrative, there is both water from above, in the form of “rain” (מָטָר in 7:4 and גֶּשֶׁם in 7:12), and water from below, as “fountains of the great deep” (מַעְיָנֹת הַחַיָּהּ in 7:11). In addition, the reappearance of the word *tehom* here is significant. This is the first time the word appears following the initial Creation account. Both its use, and the fact that the description of the cataclysm of which *tehom* is a part is brief and ambiguous, suggest a strong connection to Genesis 1:2. Thus, the very same waters that God controls in order to bring about life on earth are employed once again to destroy it. In other words, “creation is being undone, and the world returned to chaos.”³⁹ And here, it is evident that chaos is *wet*.

Like the *tehom* of Genesis 1, the chaotic primordial waters invoked here do not threaten God’s absolute sovereignty. Whereas, in other surrounding Near Eastern cultures, water appears as a challenge to leading gods, it is a submissive tool in Genesis. The waters of the Flood take over in response to God’s will. They succeed in restoring the earth to its pre-cosmogonic state, but do so only with God’s stamp of approval.⁴⁰

The affirmation of God’s absolute power is pervasive and consistent. In Genesis 1, God has the power to create using the vehicle of water; in Genesis 6-7, God has the power to destroy using the vehicle of water. Moreover, in Genesis 8, God also has the power to renew life on earth, to restore order to chaos, and again, water represents this transformation. In Genesis 8:1-2, God “sent a wind over the earth, and the waters receded. The fountains of the deep (מַעְיָנֹת) and the floodgates of the sky were stopped up, and the rain from the sky was

³⁸ Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, 49.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁴⁰ Luyster, 2.

held back.” The “wind over water” motif is reminiscent of the creation account of Genesis 1. In both cases, the waters serve as symbols of chaos, and the movement of wind heralds the return of order. The repetition of *tehom* also affirms this connection. Its use both in Genesis 1 and in Genesis 8 suggests that primordial water exists as a perpetual reserve that can either spring forth⁴¹ or be summoned by God at any particular time, either for blessing or for curse.

Where the Flood waters differ from the waters of Creation is in their associations with morality. Whereas the chaos of primordial existence has no moral implications, the Flood is God’s explicit response to the moral corruption of the human race. Perhaps one could draw connections between chaos and morality by arguing, for example, that a world without strong moral foundations crumbles into a state of chaos, but this analogy is not suggested in the text itself.

The metaphor of water as a force of death and destruction also relates to the metaphor of vastness discussed above. Just as the sea can represent immensity or totality, the waters of the Flood cover the entire face of the earth, and with the exception of life on Noah’s ark and, perhaps, the creatures of the sea, the Flood’s destruction of life is complete. This is emphasized in Genesis 9:11 which reads: “I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth,” and 9:15 which reads: “I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life.” A similar “never again” oath appears in Isaiah 54:9-10 and recalls the Flood narrative. It reads:

⁴¹ As in Gen. 49:25 and Deut. 33:10, where יָסֻדוּ “couches below.”

“For this to Me is like the waters of Noah: As I swore that the waters of Noah nevermore would flood the earth, so I swear that I will not be angry with you or rebuke you. For the mountains may move and the hills be shaken, but my loyalty shall never move from you, nor My covenant of friendship be shaken, said Adonai, who takes you back in love.”

Because the devastating power of both the Flood and God’s wrath is so immense, both require that God establish a life-affirming covenant regarding the future. It is important to note, however, that although there would never again be a “flood” that would destroy all life, water reappears as a destructive force again in the Torah, namely in the story of the Exodus from Egypt. There, however, it is simultaneously life-affirming for the Israelites and deadly for the Egyptians. But, even in Exodus, the power of the water does not represent a complete return to cosmic chaos.

LANDMARKS AND LIMITS

Water appears next in Genesis in Chapters 14 and 15. In both cases, water refers to a particular location and serves as a point of reference for the subject at hand. In Genesis 14:3, the “*Yam Hamelach*,” commonly called the Dead Sea,⁴² is the contemporary point of reference for an event that took place in the “Valley of Siddim.” As Sarna points out, the fact that the text says this valley is “now the Dead Sea” does not suggest that this body of water had not yet been formed, since it is at least 12,000 years old. Rather, the Valley of Siddim “was what existed before the area was submerged by the encroaching waters of the Dead Sea in historical times.”⁴³ This verse tells us that, not only was the Dead Sea an ancient and

⁴² *Yam hamelach* is literally “the Salt Sea,” and is called such because of its exceptionally high mineral content. Greek and Latin authors of the last century B.C.E. first called it “Dead Sea” because of its inability to support life, its saltiness, and the stillness of its waters. [Jeffrey H. Tigay, ed., *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 37.]

⁴³ Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, 104.

prominent landmark, but it suggests that water may have been commonly used as a point of reference.

In Genesis 15:18, water, in the form of rivers, marks important boundaries for the land promised to Abram. The verse reads: "On that day Adonai made a covenant with Abram, saying: 'To your offspring I assign this land, from the river of Egypt to the Great River, the river Euphrates.'" The Euphrates is recognizable, as it was mentioned in Genesis 2 as originating in and flowing from the Garden of Eden. This river is well known and easy to locate geographically. Here, we also see a second name for the Euphrates: "the Great River." This reference will also appear later in the Torah, in Deuteronomy 1:7⁴⁴.

Elsewhere, the proper name of the Euphrates is dropped altogether because it is so well-known, and it is simply called "the river." This is the case in Genesis 31:21⁴⁵ where, in typical river-fashion, the Euphrates serves as an important geographic point of reference on Jacob's journey away from Laban and towards Canaan. Its familiarity is assumed in Exodus 23:31⁴⁶, where it provides an important boundary for land promised to the Israelites, and Numbers 22:5⁴⁷, where it acts as a point of reference to identify the location of Pethor, the home of Balaam.

Its appearance in Deuteronomy 11:24 also functions to outline specific borders for the Israelite land. There, the Euphrates is first called "the river," but its specificity is then clarified by adding its proper name, as the verse reads: "Every spot on which your foot treads

⁴⁴ Deut. 1:7: "Start out and make your way to the hill country of the Amorites and to all their neighbors in the Arabah, the hill country, the Shephelah, the Negeb, the seacoast, the land of the Canaanites, and the Lebanon, as far as the Great River, the river Euphrates."

⁴⁵ Gen. 31:21: "...Soon he was across the River and heading toward the hill country of Gilead."

⁴⁶ Ex. 23:31: "I will set your borders from the Sea of Reeds to the Sea of Philistia, and from the wilderness to the River; for I will deliver the inhabitants of the land into your hands, and you will drive them out before you."

⁴⁷ Num. 22:5: "...sent messengers to Balaam son of Beor in Pethor, which is by the River, in the land of his kinsfolk, to invite him, saying: There is a people that came out of Egypt; it hides the earth from view, and it is settled next to me."

shall be yours; your territory shall extend from the wilderness to the Lebanon and from the River – the Euphrates – to the Western Sea.” The “river of Egypt,” on the other hand, is unique in Genesis 15:18. One might assume that this refers to the best-known river of Egypt, the Nile. However, Sarna explains it in the following way:

“The unique ‘river of Egypt’ here is not the Nile, which is called *Ye’or* in the Bible, as in Genesis 41:1, Exodus 2:3,5, and elsewhere, but must be its most easterly arm, which then emptied into Lake Sirbonis near Pelusium, not far from Port Said. It is probably the same as Shihor mentioned in Joshua 13:3, Jeremiah 2:18, and other biblical texts.”⁴⁸

The location of these bodies of water has been very important throughout history. Not only do they form ideal boundaries defined by God in the Divine covenant with Abram, but, as a result, they have served as political boundaries, as well. References such as these, utilizing presumably identifiable bodies of water as landmarks, enter into contemporary territorial disputes even today.

There is a certain sense of irony in the fact that bodies of water form the boundaries of land entitlement. After all, the formless and fluid nature of water itself renders it boundary-less. Water requires land, or some other physical presence, to act as its boundaries, to give it shape and form. Thus, there is a level of interdependence between water and land, as both rely on the other for definition.

WELLS, WOMEN AND WATER

Water does not appear again until Genesis 16, after Hagar runs away because Sarai was jealous of Hagar’s fertility and abused her. Verse 7 reads: “An angel of Adonai found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the road to Shur.” Later, in verse 14,

⁴⁸ Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, 117.

after Hagar receives comfort and blessing from an angel of God, that spring of water, which is now called a בְּאֵר or “well,” is called “בְּאֵר לַחַי רֹאִי,” meaning “Well of the Living One Who Sees Me.” Sarna suggests that these verses contain a Hebrew play on words. He notes that עַיִן may mean an “eye” as well as a “spring,” and שׁוֹר can mean “to see,” but it can also mean “a wall.”⁴⁹ The place where Hagar takes refuge thus suggests a “seeing eye.” This would help the reader to understand why she calls God אֱלֹהֵי רֹאִי, “God of seeing,” and the well is called the “Well of the Living One Who Sees Me.”⁵⁰

Be'er lahai-roi reappears in Genesis 24:62 and 25:11. Just before Isaac meets Rebekah, “he had just come back from the vicinity of Be'er Lahai-roi” in 24:62. Later, after the death of Abraham in 25:11, “Isaac settled near Be'er lahai-roi.” Each time this particular place is repeated, the reader may recall the story of Hagar. In particular, Be'er lahai-roi in 16:14 is the site of God's promise of a son to Hagar, namely, Ishmael. As Sarna observes, “Isaac's settling here may be a symbolic assertion of the hegemony over his brother.”⁵¹ Similarly, the fact that this well is mentioned in connection to Isaac's relationship with Rebekah, reinforces the promise that it is Isaac's descendants, not Ishmael's, who will inherit Abraham's Divine covenant.

In one sense, this serves a political agenda, but it also serves another purpose. Immediately following the statement that Isaac settles near Be'er lahai-roi, Genesis 25:12 reads: “This is the line of Ishmael, Abraham's son, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah's slave, bore to Abraham.” Be'er lahai-roi not only supports particular political assertions, but it also recalls and lends importance to Abraham's *other* son, Ishmael. Thus, it is fitting that when it

⁴⁹ Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, 120.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 174.

reappears in these later chapters, Ishmael is present. This particular well is a perfect example of how wells in Genesis act as both geographic landmarks and memory markers of events of enduring significance.

Be'er lahai-roi in Genesis 16:14 introduces a well for the first time. It appears rather abruptly, as verse 7 calls the water source a "spring of water," instead of a "well." These terms have different meanings. In contrast to a spring, in which underground water comes forth in a natural way, a well is an artificial device in which underground water is obtained by technological means.⁵² Curiously, we see the same interchange of terms in 24:11 and 24:13. These apparent discrepancies beg for clarification. Sarna offers the following explanation: "Since wells may be dug for greater convenience in the vicinity of springs, the two terms could be used interchangeably. It is also possible that Hebrew *be'er* could have had a wider connotation than what is understood by the modern English term 'well.'"⁵³ In other words, the terms are not necessarily inconsistent. Perhaps they refer to the close proximity of springs to wells or they suggest that the terms were used synonymously at the time of the text's redaction.

It is also possible that this interplay of words is intended to highlight something about the particular characters involved. A spring, or *ʾayin*, is natural, wild and uncontrolled. A well, or *be'er*, on the other hand, is a device created by humans in order to access and control water. Therefore, perhaps the use of *ayin* represents a person's lack of control, not only of water but of a particular situation, and the use of *be'er* signifies one's grasp of control. For example, when Hagar has no control, when she is chased away by Sarai in Genesis 16:7, she appears by an *ayin*. But after Hagar receives assurance of a child from God and asserts a

⁵² Botterweck, 463.

⁵³ Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, 122.

sense of control by naming God "*El-roi*" in Genesis 16:14, the site of the scene is called a *be'er*. In Genesis 24:11, when Abraham's servant demonstrates control by situating himself in the best possible location to meet eligible women, that location is called a *be'er*. But when he has no control, when he can only wait and hope that an appropriate bride for Isaac meets him, the water in his proximity is called an *ayin*. Hence, water is much more than a substance necessary for physical survival. It is also a symbol, indicative of vulnerabilities of the human condition.

It is appropriate that a well should appear in relation to Hagar, because wells of water are repeatedly associated with women in the Torah. After Hagar, it is Rebekah who appears at the well in Genesis 24. Then, in Chapter 29, Jacob meets Rachel at the site of a well. Later, in Exodus 2:15, Moses encounters Tzipora at the well. In fact, as Robert Alter writes, "in biblical narrative more or less the same story often seems to be told two or three or more times about different characters."⁵⁴ These are what Alter describes as "type-scenes." More specifically, these type-scenes are betrothal scenes.

Because of the great dependence on water for survival, the well was a common gathering place in ancient Near Eastern society. Wells in arid regions made them especially important to travelers, and made them into social and religious centers of habitation and meeting.⁵⁵ It was a widespread custom to send younger women to draw water from a well. In addition to gathering much-needed water for her community or family, a woman's presence at a well may have signaled her sexual availability, opening the door for marriage proposals.

⁵⁴ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1981), 49.

⁵⁵ Botterweck, 273.

In the two Genesis type-scenes, *who* draws the water and *how* it is done says something significant about the characters involved. For example, in Chapter 24, it is Rebekah who draws water from the well. This is the only one of these type-scenes in which a woman draws the water. As Alter observes:

"Indeed, the narrator goes out of his way to give weight to his act by presenting Rebekah as a continuous whirl of purposeful activity. In four short verses (Gen. 24:16, 18-20), she is the subject of eleven verbs of action and one of speech, going down to the well, drawing water, filling the pitcher, pouring, giving drink..."⁵⁶

This is a significant introduction to her character because, later, Rebekah will be a crucial *doer*, taking the initiative to obtain the paternal blessing for her favored son, Jacob.

"Rebekah is to become the shrewdest and most potent of the matriarchs, and so it is entirely appropriate that she should dominate her betrothal scene."⁵⁷

The well in Genesis 29 is also a site of character confirmation. In Rachel's betrothal scene, it is Jacob who waters the flock from the well. In addition, he faces an obstacle to overcome in doing so, namely, the stone on the mouth of the well. Alter notes:

"This minor variation of the convention contributes to the consistent characterization of Jacob, for we already know him, as his name at birth has been etymologized, as the 'heel-grabber' or wrestler, and we shall continue to see him as the contender, the man who seizes his fate, tackles his adversaries, with his own two hands. If the well of the betrothal scene is in general associated with woman and fertility, it is particularly appropriate that this one should be blocked by an obstacle, for Jacob will obtain the woman he wants only through great labor, against resistance, and even then God will, in the relevant biblical idiom, 'shut up her womb' for years until she finally bears Joseph."⁵⁸

In both of these scenes, it is the characters' interaction with water that sheds light on who they are, and who they will become.

⁵⁶ Alter, 53-54.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

The image of the well in connection to women also has metaphoric significance. As a source of nourishment and life, water is a symbol of fertility. Water brings forth life in the Creation narrative. Water nourishes the Garden of Eden. Water sustains all living creatures. Similarly, women bring life into the world, and women nourish and sustain life. The well may also be a symbol for a woman, or, more specifically, the womb, as the blocked well in Genesis 29:2-3 and 29:10 parallels Rachel's "blocked" womb. Hence, the proximity of women to wells of water is no accident. It is suggestive of the life-giving power of both women and water.

WASHING TO WELCOME THE WEARY

The next time water appears in the text, it serves a function that is unique to the Book of Genesis. In Genesis 18, three strangers visit Abraham. After greeting them, Abraham says in verse 4: "Let a little water be brought; bathe your feet and recline under the tree." Water here appears as *mayim*, and we see the verb root **צָרַף** – to wash or bathe – for the first time. This washing of the feet with water is a demonstration of hospitality. Sarna comments that this gesture is a "much appreciated comfort to the traveler with his sandal-like footwear and the pervasive dust of the roads."⁵⁹

While water as a tool for demonstrating hospitality is not found in any other book of the Torah, we see this ritual-like bathing behavior several other times throughout Genesis. For example, in Genesis 19:2, it is appropriate that, as a member of Abraham's family, Lot offers to bathe the feet of two visiting angels. Here, only the verb "to bathe" is used, whereas water is not specifically mentioned. Yet, because the ritual is identical to that of Abraham,

⁵⁹ Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, 129.

and it will be repeated in later texts with water, one can infer that it was water that was used for the washing. In Chapter 24, the water for washing is explicit. When, in verse 32, Abraham's servant meets Rebekah at the well, he is invited inside and "water was brought to bathe his feet and the feet of the men with him," and, in Genesis 43:24, Joseph's brothers are given "water to bathe their feet" upon entering Joseph's house.

Is water used in these instances simply as a part of a local custom, or is it representative of something greater? Why might water be utilized to signify welcoming? Perhaps one could draw a connection between the use of water in Creation as welcoming something into the world, and the use of water in foot-bathing as welcoming someone into the home. Or, if attributes of water suggest chaos and danger, as stated above, the controlled and contained act of washing with it conveys a sense of security and stability to weary and unstable travelers. Or, on a simpler level, just as water is life-giving in other ways, water is refreshing, renewing and comforting for the traveler.⁶⁰

SYMBOLS OF SURVIVAL

Perhaps the life-giving powers of water are less evident in the foot-washing scenes. However, water clearly functions as a necessity of survival elsewhere in the Book of Genesis. For example, when Hagar is banished from Abraham's camp, Genesis 21:14-16 reads:

"¹⁴Early next morning Abraham took some bread and a skin of water, and gave them to Hagar. He placed them over her shoulder, together with the child, and sent her away. And she wandered about in the wilderness of Bee-Sheba. ¹⁵When the water was gone from the skin, she left the child under one of the bushes, ¹⁶and went and sat down at a distance, a bowshot away; for she thought, 'Let me not look on as the child dies.' And sitting thus afar, she burst into tears."

⁶⁰ While not associated with foot-washing or traveling, water also appears as a source of refreshment in Gen. 43:31. There, Joseph washes his face in order to regain his composure with his brothers.

Hagar and Ishmael cannot survive in the wilderness without water. Its presence preserves life, whereas its absence brings death. Another example of the dramatic impact of a lack of water appears later in Genesis 37:24, when Joseph's brothers throw him into a pit that is "empty; there was no water in it." A pit without water was more likely to have snakes and scorpions in it, signifying further danger.

In these instances, water obviously serves a literal function, as a necessity of survival. Yet, water may also serve a metaphoric function. The water-life connection is symbolic of Hagar's relationship with Abraham, and later, with Ishmael. Just as she is dependent upon water to survive, she is dependent upon her husband and son to give her life meaning. With Abraham (and with water), Hagar has security and purpose, and she brings new life into the world. Without Abraham (and without water), however, Hagar has no security and no purpose, and fears the death of the life she created. In addition to being without water, Hagar is without community or defined status, which is the equivalent of social demise.

Then, Genesis 21:17-19 reads:

"¹⁷God heard the cry of the boy, and an angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, 'What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is. ¹⁸Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him.' ¹⁹Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water, and let the boy drink."

As a result of Ishmael's silent cry, not only is Hagar reunited with water, the physical source of life, but the promise of Ishmael's future restores her security and purpose. She has an important role to play as the mother of a "great nation." She must lift him up and hold him by the hand. Hagar's eyes are opened to water, to her life's possibilities, and she must in turn give her son water, the essence of life, in order that he may fulfill his destiny.

As a life-renewing substance, water is a sign of blessing. Perhaps the well of water always existed in her proximity, but Hagar needed God's help in order to see it. Thus, the water is a gift from God. As Michael Fishbane writes, water is "the supernatural source of sustenance and salvation."⁶¹ So, in addition to being a possible indication of the presence of women, and the presence of chaos discussed above, water is also an indication of the presence of God. Humans need water in order to survive, but one must remember that, according to the Torah, the liquid of life comes from the Divine.

We find that water is a necessity for the survival of animals, as well as humans. In Genesis 24:14, Abraham's servant seeks water for his own refreshment, but in this verse, as well as in verses 19-20 and 22, it is Abraham's camels that need water. They are watered, or given water, using the verb root שָׁקַח. In Genesis 29:2-3, 7-8 and 10, it is the sheep of Laban's flock that are watered. In both cases, this watering takes place at the mouth of a well, or *be'er*. Like humans, the animals also need water to survive, particularly in the hot and arid climate in which they lived. In this sense, the water for nourishing the camels and sheep is a literal representation.

However, giving water to animals serves an important symbolic role, as well. Let us return to the scene of Rebekah at the well in Chapter 24, the type-scene of meeting and betrothal. This scene also utilizes water in a unique way that goes beyond the proximity of water in the well. Here, water becomes a vehicle for demonstrating generosity and fulfilling prophecy. In search of a wife for Isaac, Abraham's servant approaches the well on the outskirts of the city of Nahor. He says in Genesis 24:13-14:

⁶¹ Michael A. Fishbane, "The Well of Living Water: A Biblical Motif and its Ancient Transformations." *Talmon* (1992), 5.

“Here I stand by the spring as the daughters of the townsmen come out to draw water; let the maiden to whom I say, ‘Please, lower your jar that I may drink,’ and who replies, ‘Drink, and I will also water your camels’ – let her be the one whom You have decreed for your servant Isaac. Thereby I shall know that You have dealt graciously with my master.”

It is through water that a woman must demonstrate her worthiness to be Isaac’s mate. When, in verses 17-20, Rebekah does exactly as the servant had described, giving him water to drink and also watering his camels, her future is sealed. Water becomes a tool for testing virtue and determining destiny.

PATRIARCHAL PROMISE

Like rivers, wells are also the site of particular geographic landmarks and points of reference. The frequency of geographical names associated with wells or cistern may easily be explained by the role they played as gathering points and places people must pass by of necessity. We have already discussed the repetition of one named well; Be’er lahai-roi. But the most recurrent place named in relation to a well is בְּאֵר שֶׁבַע - *Be’er Sheva*.⁶²

In Genesis 21:14, Hagar wanders around “in the wilderness of Be’er Sheva.” Yet, curiously, it seems as though the name of the place is not given officially until Abraham and Abimelech make a pact there, as Genesis 21:31 reads: “Hence that place was called Be’er Sheva, for there the two of them swore an oath.” The name of this place can mean either “well of seven” or “well of oath.” Our narrative fuses both meanings, as Chapter 21 uses one שֶׁבַע – “oath” – but alludes to the other with “seven” sheep. After all, Abraham and

⁶² According to Sarna, this place did not become an established city in Biblical times. He writes: “Negotiations over the use of the water facilities are carried on with the king of Gerar. No king, ruler, or inhabitant of Be’er Sheva is ever mentioned. There is no suggestion of the existence of any permanent settlement.” [Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, 389.]

Abimelech dispute the ownership of a well of water, and at the site of this well, they make an oath over seven ewes.

While one can explore its etiology, one cannot overlook some larger symbolic possibilities associated with Be'er Sheva. This particular spot, which appears eleven times in the Book of Genesis, signifies important covenantal relationships. First, in the case of Hagar in Chapter 21, her wandering in "the wilderness of Be'er Sheva" signifies that a meeting with God is imminent. There she will receive God's promise that Ishmael will become a great nation. Be'er Sheva becomes a signpost indicating that destiny would soon be pronounced.

The significance of Be'er Sheva is further illustrated in Abraham's "well scene" later in the chapter. In this case, the covenantal relationship defined is that between Abraham and the Promised Land, as this *be'er* is his first acquisition of land.⁶³ The next time Be'er Sheva appears, in Chapter 22, Abraham has just endured the ultimate Divine test; the binding and near-sacrifice of his son Isaac. In Genesis 22:19, after receiving Divine blessing and reaffirming his covenant with God, "Abraham returned to his servants, and they departed together for Be'er Sheva; and Abraham stayed in Be'er Sheva." Again, this water site appears in the same scene in which an important covenantal relationship is established.

In Chapter 26, the story of Isaac and Abimelech echoes that of his father Abraham. Thus, it is no surprise that Be'er Sheva also plays a role in Isaac's narrative. Yet, Isaac's connection with Be'er Sheva has to be earned. After quarreling over wells with Abimelech's men, Isaac finally digs a well that is not disputed. But, a crucial thing has to happen before that is possible. Genesis 26:18-21 reads:

"¹⁸Isaac dug anew the wells which had been dug in the days of his father Abraham and which the Philistines had stopped up after Abraham's death' and he gave them

⁶³ The purchase of the well precedes the purchase of Sarah's tomb, a site that is commonly mistaken for the first Jewish land acquisition.

the same names that his father had given them. ¹⁹But when Isaac's servants, digging in the wadi, found there a well of *fresh water* [מַיִם חַיִּים], ²⁰the herdsmen of Gerar quarreled with Isaac's herdsmen, saying, 'The water is ours.' He named that well *Esek*, because they contended with him. ²¹And when they dig another well, they disputed over that one also' so he named it *Sitnah*."

Verse 18 makes it clear that Isaac is re-digging in the exact same places where his father had dug before him. He gives the wells the exact same names that his father had given them.

Isaac is not establishing anything new on his own; he is still living in the shadow of his father. He has not yet grown into his own leadership status. But, in verse 19, Isaac's servants discover מַיִם חַיִּים. This is the first time this vital term is used in the Torah, and the only time it is used in Genesis, but it will appear in several more key places in other books, and I will discuss its other functions at greater length in later chapters.

Mayim chayim is often translated as "fresh water" or "spring water," but it literally means "living water." This term reinforces all of the other associations between water and its life-giving powers. In the case of Isaac, perhaps his servants did find a different kind of water in a new well, but, given the transformation that takes place in Isaac, it appears as though the *mayim chayim* is symbolic of a new life – or a new role – which Isaac discovers and embraces. Only after he discovers the *mayim chayim* in a well of his *own*, does Isaac find his *own* voice, and stand up to give his *own* names to the disputed wells. After demonstrating this leadership twice, his third well is undisputed. A new chapter of his life begins.

This is where Be'er Sheva appears, as Genesis 26:23 reads, "From there he went up to Be'er Sheva." Here, Be'er Sheva signifies two things. First, it serves as a reminder of the similar episode with Abraham, making the parallel between father and son indisputable. Second, it highlights Isaac's own acquisition of land, in a locale different from that of his

father, as he had to go up *to* Be'er Sheva. This, like the naming of his own wells, is symbolic of his maturation as the new patriarch of the Chosen People. In case there is any doubt about this, the very next verse reads: "That night Adonai appeared to him and said, 'I am the God of your father Abraham. Fear not, for I am with you, and I will bless you and increase your offspring for the sake of My servant Abraham.'" Hence, Isaac again receives Divine blessing and affirms his own covenantal relationship with God. His role as a patriarch is solidified in Genesis 26:33, when, after making an oath with Abimelech (again, echoing his father), Isaac's servants dig a well and find water. Isaac "named it *Shivah*; therefore the name of the city is Be'er Sheva to this day." After demonstrating leadership and establishing his own covenantal relationship with God, Isaac is then able to step into his father's shoes at the water-rich site of Be'er Sheva.

Be'er Sheva plays a significant role for the first two patriarchs, and it appears in Jacob's narrative, as well. The difference is, however, that Be'er Sheva has lost its direct association with water in the Jacob narrative. Rather, it functions strictly as a geographic and symbolic site. Genesis 28:10 reads: "Jacob left Be'er Sheva, and set out for Haran." Like the mention of Hagar's proximity to Be'er Sheva in Genesis 16, here Be'er Sheva signifies that an important event is about to take place. What immediately follows this verse is the story of Jacob's dream and encounter with God in Genesis 28:11-22. In this ethereal encounter, Jacob receives a blessing from God, and establishes his own Divine covenant. The fact that verse 10 mentions Haran is also significant, as this serves as a reminder of Jacob's relationship to Abraham. Haran was the place where Abraham established *his* covenant with God in Genesis 12. Thus, Genesis 28:10 is highly suggestive of what is yet to come for Jacob.

Similarly, near the end of Jacob's life, he revisits Be'er Sheva once more, and again, has a Divine encounter there. As Jacob is on his way to reunite with his son Joseph in Egypt, Genesis 46:1-5 reads:

"¹Israel⁶⁴ set out with all that was his, and he came to Be'er Sheva, where he offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac. ²God called to Israel in a vision by night: 'Jacob! Jacob!' He answered, 'Here,' ³And [God] said, 'I am God, the God of your father. Fear not to go down to Egypt, for I will make you there into a great nation. ⁴I Myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I Myself will also bring you back; and Joseph's hand shall close your eyes.' ⁵So Jacob set out from Be'er Sheva..."

The site of Be'er Sheva is a recurrent site of Divine covenant between Jacob and God.

Just as Be'er Sheva may signify important covenantal relationships among the patriarchs, the wells in the narratives of Abraham and Isaac are also objects of contention. For example, in Genesis 21:25, "Abraham reproached Abimelech for the well of water which the servants of Abimelech had seized." This is followed by the repeated quarreling over wells in Isaac's "well scene" in Genesis 26:15-21. In fact, the second well that Isaac names is called "*Sitnah*," and the verb derived from the root of this word means "to show hostility."⁶⁵ Water was an incredibly precious natural resource in this arid climate. Access to water was not only a necessity for survival, but it also signified prosperity for those who controlled it. Thus, water became the basis for struggles of power and status, as well as sustenance.

BROTHERLY BLESSINGS

In Genesis, there is competition and yearning not only for water itself, but also for what water represents. Water is a physical life force, but it is also a symbol of prosperity and

⁶⁴ This is another name for Jacob, given to him in Gen. 32:29.

⁶⁵ Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, 186.

power. This is particularly true when water appears in the form of טל, or dew. In Genesis 27, Jacob not only usurps Esau's birthright, but he tricks Isaac into giving him Esau's blessing, as well. In verses 28-29, Isaac blesses Jacob, saying: "May God give you of the dew of heaven and the fat of the earth, abundance of new grain and wine...." Here, dew is a symbol of prosperity. Because it is the dew "of heaven," it is clear that such prosperity is a gift from God.

Earlier in Genesis, Be'er Lahai Roi alludes to the brotherly hierarchy between Isaac and Ishmael, and serves both political and symbolic purposes. Similarly, the blessing of *tal* emphasizes the hegemony of Jacob over Esau, in both the narrative and political sense. But, just as Be'er Lahai Roi also marks blessing and promise for Ishmael, so too, does the blessing of *tal* fall upon Esau. Genesis 27:39-40 reads: "And his father Isaac answered, saying to him, 'See, your abode shall enjoy the fat of the earth and the dew of heaven above....' Esau may not receive the blessing he expected, but he does receive a blessing of *tal* from heaven, signifying a prosperous future.⁶⁶ In each story of sibling rivalry, the "other" brother is honored, and in each story it is water that helps to restore a sense of just equilibrium.

JACOB AT THE JABBOK

That sense of balance between Jacob and Esau is not truly achieved until Chapter 32 of Genesis. The delay is the consequence of both Esau's perceived desire for retribution, and Jacob's self-centered nature. In order for Jacob to face Esau and what transpired between

⁶⁶ Gen. 36:24 suggests that Esau's descendents are blessed with abundance, as well. The verse describes a descendent of Esau as "Anah who discovered hot springs in the wilderness."

them, he must undergo a personal transformation. Water provides the setting for that transformation, as Jacob has a dramatic experience at the bank of the Jabbok River.⁶⁷

The Jabbok is a subsidiary of the Jordan River, a body of water that is not only a prominent boundary of the Promised Land, but also frequently signifies important symbolic boundary crossings.^{68, 69} Genesis 32:11 indicates that Jacob is in the proximity of the Jordan, as he says: "...with my staff alone I crossed this Jordan..." Standing on the banks of the Jabbok, Jacob can point to the Jordan, which is visible in the distance.⁷⁰ The presence of the Jordan in this verse is a clue that something significant lies ahead.

That significant event appears in Genesis 32:23-33, which reads:⁷¹

"²³And he rose in the night and took his two wives and his two maidservants and his eleven sons and crossed the Jabbok ford. ²⁴And he took them and had them cross the river and also had all that was his cross. ²⁵And Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until the rising of dawn. ²⁶And he saw that he was not able against him, and he touched the inside of his thigh. And the inside of Jacob's thigh was dislocated in his wrestling with him. ²⁷And he said, 'Send me away because the dawn has risen.' And he said, 'I will not send you away unless you bless me.' ²⁸And he said to him, 'What is your name?' And he said, 'Jacob.' ²⁹And he said, 'Your name will not be said 'Jacob' anymore, but 'Israel,' because you persisted with God and with people and were able.' ³⁰And Jacob asked, and he said, 'Tell me your name.' And he said, 'Why is this you ask my name?' And, departing, he blessed him there. ³¹And Jacob called the name of the place Peni-el, 'because I saw God face-to-face, and my soul was delivered.' ³²And the sun rose for him as he passed Penu-el, and he limped on his thigh. ³³On this account, the children of Israel do not eat the tendon of the muscle that is on the inside of the thigh, to this day, because he touched the inside of Jacob's thigh on the tendon of the muscle."

⁶⁷ I linger on this particular story longer than other Biblical narratives because it is such a poignant example of water as the site for personal transformation.

⁶⁸ The Jordan is featured as a physical boundary in: Gen. 32:11 and 50:10-11; Num. 13:29, 22:1, 26:3, 26:63, 31:12, 32:5, 32:19, 32:21, 32:29, 32:32, 33:48-51, 34:12, 34:15, 35:1, 35:10, 35:14, and 36:13; and Deut. 3:8, 3:17, 3:20, 4:41, 4:46-47, 4:49, and 11:30. It appears as a symbolic boundary in 2 Kings 5:10 and 2 Kings 5:14. It appears as both a physical and symbolic boundary in relation to the manifestation of the Israelite possession of the Promised Land in: Deut. 1:1, 1:5, 2:29, 3:25, 3:27, 4:21-22, 4:26, 9:1, 11:31, 12:10, 27: 2, 27:4, 27:12, 30:18, 31:2, 31:13, and 32:47.

⁶⁹ The Jabbok appears as a reference to a physical boundary in Num. 21:24, Deut. 2:37 and Deut 3:16.

⁷⁰ Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary, Genesis*, 225.

⁷¹ The translation of this passage is my own.

When examining the structure of this passage as a whole, one can see that the focal point of the narrative is Jacob's transformation from a scared individual to an empowered representative of a nation. Initially, in the face of an uncertain future, Jacob is only concerned with himself and his possessions (both material and familial). The focus is on making sure that his belongings are secured, and, once that is accomplished, the focus is simply on him ("Jacob was left alone").

For the reader, the shift from isolation to encounter with another is immediate, and there is not much time to linger in Jacob's solitude. This is consistent with the structural flow, because the abrupt interruption of Jacob's privacy forces him to confront the mysterious "שׂרָפָן" and leads the reader to the heart of the narrative. The importance of this confrontation is reflected in its length relative to the other aspects of the episode. More than half of the whole scene on the riverbank (verses 25-30) depicts this encounter. It is only through this meeting with the mysterious "man" that Jacob is able to continue on his journey and to fulfill his destiny as the leader of the Israelite nation.

In order to fully understand the impact of the event, it is necessary to remember the place from which Jacob comes. From the time of his birth, through his experiences with his brother, his father (and later, his uncle), Jacob is continually characterized as a self-interested and deceptive manipulator. In verses 23-24, Jacob's actions regarding the placement of his family members and possessions along the river are characteristic of his prior behavior. His first priority is looking out for himself, even if that means putting his loved ones in danger. "The narrator places four women and twelve children in a less than hospitable environment (a sleepless night, a foreign land, approaching enemies...) and then suddenly has their only

defender disappear away from his family.”⁷² A close look at these verses reveals that, rather than valiantly defending his family, Jacob is cowardly hiding behind them to survive.

In verse 23, *וַיַּעְבֹּר* is not causative (“he crossed”), whereas the verbs *וַיַּעְבִּיר* and *וַיַּעְבִּירָם* in verse 24 are causative (“he had them cross”). One could presume that Jacob first crosses the river alone, and then has his family and possessions cross after him. However, as Serge Frolov points out, the presence of *וַיִּקַּח* (“he took”) in both verses indicates that the family participates in both phases of the process.⁷³ While some scholars believe this redundancy is the result of multiple authors of the text, Frolov argues that there are actually two separate crossings: In verse 23, Jacob crosses the river together with his family; in verse 24, he sends his family across the river again, and sends away all his possessions, but stays behind.⁷⁴

Ancient Near Eastern river-demon folklore has indicated the dangers of river crossings in ancient times, and this narrative is representative of the historical context from which it came. Claus Westermann explains that the narrative “displays animistic traits and is inseparable from its setting, the river and the ford. It is a typical local tale, in which the danger of a ford is personified in a spirit or demon that will not permit the traveler to cross.”⁷⁵ There are countless tales from the ancient world of river-spirits who fight with humans who sought to cross their domains. Yet, this story differs in a significant way. As Sarna writes: “The vagueness of the description of the adversary contrasts strongly with the usual pattern in which the spirit assumes the form of animals, serpents, and monsters,

⁷² Serge Frolov, “The Other Side of the Jabbok: Genesis 32 as a Fiasco of Patriarchy,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 91 (2000), 42.

⁷³ Frolov, 47.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), 228.

constantly shifting from one guise to another in the course of its attacks.”⁷⁶ Nevertheless, it is clear that the author of this narrative is familiar with the river-demon motif of ancient Near Eastern literature, a motif that reflects the danger associated with river-crossings in the ancient world.

Considering this risk, why would Jacob cause his family to cross the same river twice? Frolov hypothesizes that, not only are there two separate crossings in this narrative, but there are two separate *rivers*, as well. He writes: “Verse 23 places the action at the ‘Jabbok ford,’ while verse 24 reports that a ‘river’ was crossed. It is possible that *two* rivers had been crossed. This makes Jacob’s behavior more understandable, explaining that he did not drive his household in meaningless circles.”⁷⁷

It does not explain, however, the reason why Jacob abandons his family on the opposite side of the river. If the aforementioned hypothesis is accurate, Jacob’s family crosses two rivers – in the direction of Esau and impending danger – while he only crosses one. Thus, Jacob uses his caravan as a protective shield, strategically placing his family between himself and Esau, directly in harm’s way. Yet, Jacob learns quickly that doing so does not guarantee his safety. “Trying to avoid confrontation with a human adversary, he finds himself engaged in a much more perilous struggle with the numen.”⁷⁸ In other words, he may have found a way to temporarily avoid Esau, but he faces another struggle from which he cannot escape.

Through this encounter beside the Jabbok, Jacob is transformed. First, he experiences a physical change through his wrestling injury. Then, he experiences a spiritual

⁷⁶ Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, Inc., 1970), 205.

⁷⁷ Frolov, 47.

⁷⁸ Frolov, 56.

transformation; an identity makeover, through requesting and receiving a blessing, and receiving a new name. The consequences of this transformation are as follows: By receiving a name, Jacob feels empowered to confer a name on the place of the encounter; Jacob is physically altered for the rest of his life; and Jacob becomes the father of a nation that will remember and revere his experience for generations to come.

Jacob's transformation is physical, emotional and spiritual. Yet, he is still called Jacob even after his second naming as Israel (just as I continue to refer to him as Jacob in this analysis). What is the significance of a name change that is not consistently used thereafter? Perhaps it conveys that true change is incremental, and is not always complete. While Jacob remains associated with his old name, and thereby his past, he nevertheless demonstrates *new* behavior immediately after leaving the Jabbok. In Genesis 32:23-24, Jacob is strategic and cowardly, situating his family and belongings before him. In contrast to this behavior, after having wrestled with God and with himself, in Genesis 33:3 Jacob advances first – *before* his family – toward his brother and potential danger. It is therefore the crossing of water boundaries that signifies Jacob's crossing into a new stage of life and self-actualization.

A similar type of transformative water-crossing motif also appears in Exodus, where the Israelites emerge from crossing the *Yam Suf* with a new communal identity. And, just as "Israel" occasionally reverts back to "Jacob"-like behavior in Genesis, the Israelites rebel against God in the wilderness and struggle to embrace their status as a free nation that is bound by holy covenant. The crossing of the *Yam Suf* and all of its metaphoric significance will be discussed at great length in Chapter Two.

NOURISHMENT FROM THE NILE

Genesis 41 introduces another significant body of water: הַיָּאֵר – the Nile. Like the Euphrates, the Nile is well-known and easy to locate. In fact, it is so prominent that it never even requires association with water. It is never called “the Nile River” or “the River Nile” in the Torah. It is always simply called by its proper name.

The Nile appears in two passages of this chapter, each time as part of Pharaoh’s dream. The dream is described in Genesis 41:1-4, which reads:

“¹After two years’ time, Pharaoh dreamed that he was standing by the Nile, ²when out of the Nile there came up seven cows, handsome and sturdy, and they grazed in the reed grass. ³But presently, seven other cows came up from the Nile close behind them, ugly and gaunt, and stood beside the cows on the bank of the Nile; ⁴and the ugly gaunt cows ate up the seven handsome sturdy cows. And Pharaoh awoke.”

Pharaoh relays this scene to Joseph in Genesis 41:17-21. In each passage, the Nile figures prominently. Not only is it the setting of the dream, but the Nile’s significance is highlighted by the fact that it is mentioned by name *six* times between the two descriptions. Joseph informs Pharaoh that his dream foreshadows seven years of abundance followed by seven years of great famine in Egypt. That the symbol of both plenty and famine emerges from the Nile signifies the extent to which the Egyptians depended on the Nile for sustenance and survival. As Sarna writes: “The Nile as the setting for Pharaoh’s dream is fateful, for the river was literally the lifeline of Egypt, the source of its entire economy.”⁷⁹ Just as water has functioned as a life-force or source of destruction elsewhere, as a central allegorical image in Genesis 41, water becomes a symbolic source of both life and death for the people of the region.

⁷⁹ Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, 281.

SUGGESTIONS OF SEXUALITY

At the end of Genesis, water appears as a metaphor in two different ways. First, in Genesis 49:4, it functions as a symbol of instability. On his deathbed, Jacob addresses each of his sons. To Reuben he says: "Unstable as water [בְּתוֹזָא כַּמַּיִם], you shall excel no longer; for when you mounted your father's bed, you brought disgrace - my couch he mounted!" The text could have read simply "unstable" and it would have been understood. Instead, Reuben is likened to water. Water *is* unstable. It flows, it evaporates, it gushes, it sprouts, it seeps, it surges, it floods, and so on. In fact, from the Biblical point of view, when out of human control,⁸⁰ water is perhaps the most unpredictable substance imaginable. Thus, to compare Reuben's behavior to water adds another layer of meaning that intensifies the statement.

Jacob criticizes Reuben for his sexual impropriety.⁸¹ Just as water has no self-control, Reuben has no self-control. This kind of behavior not only reveals Reuben's lack of stability, but it also has the potential to lead to the instability of society, as clearly defined sexual boundaries were of the utmost importance. Later in this chapter, verse 25 echoes this associative connection between water and sexuality. Or, more specifically, it highlights the connection between water and fertility.

Verses 22-24 focus on Joseph's past, while verse 25 shifts to bless Joseph's future: "The God of your father who helps you, and Shaddai who blesses you with blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that couches below [בְּרִכַּת הַתְּהוֹם וּבְרִכַּת הַשָּׁמַיִם], blessings of the breast and womb." *Tehom*, as we know from Genesis 1, is an overt water reference, meaning the primordial subterranean waters. But, according to Sarna, there is also a more

⁸⁰ See the discussion of the *be'er* as a symbol of human control in the "Wells, Women and Water" section.

⁸¹ See Gen. 35:22, where Reuben sleeps with Bilhah, Jacob's concubine.

subtle water reference in this verse. He claims that the “blessings of heaven above” consist of rain and dew and abundance of water resources, “all of which symbolize fruitfulness of the soil and the fecundity (= ‘breast and womb’) of animals and humans.”⁸² In other words, at first glance, it may seem as if there are three distinct blessings included in this verse, but all three blessings are synonymous. All three phrases convey a blessing of fertility and life, and two out of those three utilize the image of water to do so.

The use of *tehom* is of particular interest here. This is the fourth and final time the term is used in Genesis, as well as the last image of water in the book. If we recall Genesis 1:2, *tehom* was also the very *first* reference to water in Genesis. This provides more than just an interesting bookend. In one sense, it could represent a progression. Whereas *tehom* first appears as a force that needs to be contained in Genesis 1:2, it is fully under God’s control in Genesis 49:25. Yet, this progression is not linear, for throughout the book, *tehom* represents both chaos/danger and fertility/blessing. What remains consistent is that these dichotomies underscore the vast power of water, as well as the ultimate power of God.

⁸² Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, 344.

CHAPTER TWO

WATER AS WONDER: WATER IN THE EXODUS NARRATIVE (EXODUS 1-15:21)

CREATION REVISITED

Water appears and plays an important role in the very beginning of the Book of Exodus. Here, water both distinguishes distinct events in Exodus, and also echoes events that take place in Genesis. A specific reference to water does not appear until the last verse of Chapter 1. In Exodus 1:22, Pharaoh attempts to annihilate the Israelite people and issues his deadly decree saying, "Every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile, but let every girl live." In the Flood narrative of Genesis 6-8, water functions as a vehicle for death and destruction. There, God utilizes its power, whereas here, it is a human being. Yet, there is a subtle irony in Pharaoh's decree. As Sarna notes, his "chosen instrument of destruction – water – will in the end become the agency of Egypt's punishment."⁸³ Unbeknownst to the Egyptian king, his pronouncement acts as a foreshadowing of what is yet to come.

There is also irony in the fact that in Exodus 2:3-6, the Nile provides Moses with refuge and life, rather than danger and death, as Pharaoh demands. This twist of fate, in addition to the fact that the Nile is an enormous body of water upon which the Egyptians are utterly dependent for survival, reinforces the continuing connections between water and life. Much like the waters of Genesis, which could be both life-giving and life-taking, the waters of Exodus fluctuate between being constructive and destructive vehicles.

⁸³ Nahum M. Sarna, ed., *The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 8.

The words and images in Exodus 2:2-3 have more direct associations with Genesis, as these verses convey echoes of both the Creation narrative and the Flood narrative. They read:

²The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was good, she hid him for three months. ³When she could hide him no longer, she got a wicker basket for him and caulked it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child into it and placed it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile.”

Most translators translate “וַיַּרְא אֱתָנוּ כִּי-טוֹב הוּא” as “she saw how beautiful he was” or “she saw how strong he was.” I chose “she saw that he was good” not only because it stays closer to the Hebrew, but it also helps to highlight an important inter-textual parallel. This clause echoes a key phrase, seven times repeated in the Genesis Creation narrative: “וַיַּרְא אֱלֹהִים כִּי-טוֹב” – “God saw that it was good.” Much like the Flood narrative, this story is another repetition of Creation, of a different kind. As Sarna writes: “This parallel suggests that the birth of Moses is intended to be understood as the dawn of a new creative era.”⁸⁴

This connection is reinforced by the fact that, in verse 3, the basket in which Moses is placed is called a *תִּבְנָה*. The only other time this term appears in the Torah is as the ark in which Noah and his family are saved from the waters of the Flood. Sarna says: “Its use here underscores both the vulnerability of its occupant and its being under divine protection. Evocation of the Flood narrative also suggests, once again, that the birth of Moses signals a new era in history.”⁸⁵ Thus, just as water plays a critical role in the Creation story of Genesis 1, and the re-creation story of Genesis 6-8, water plays a role and acts as the setting for another creation narrative in Exodus 2.

⁸⁴ Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, 9.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

The Nile, into which Moses is placed in verse 3, may have symbolic significance, but it also serves a practical function. Much like many of the rivers and wells of Genesis, the Nile also functions as a geographic landmark in Egypt. This is true for its use throughout the book of Exodus. In verse 5, the Nile is named again as the site where Pharaoh's daughter bathes. Here, the river serves to provide a particular location for the narrative, giving it more literary structure. In other words, repeating its name makes it clear that the river in which the baby is placed and the river in which the princess bathes is the same body of water.

Several verses later, a direct water reference appears again in the explanation of Moses' name. Because Moses' birth and rescue is related to water, it is appropriate that his name should reflect water, as well. Exodus 2:10 reads: "...She named him Moses, explaining, 'I drew him out of the water.'" This explanation is a word play between Egyptian and Hebrew. The Pharaoh's daughter would have given the baby an Egyptian name, and in fact, "Mose" is a common Egyptian name, meaning "a child."⁸⁶ Yet, as Sarna explains, the narrator translates the name using its Hebrew origin. Mose is connected with the Hebrew מִשֵּׁה, meaning, "to draw up/out (of water)." Sarna writes: "The princess explains the name as though the form is *mashui*, 'the one drawn out,' as a passive participle, whereas it is actually an active participle, 'he who draws out,' and becomes an oblique reference to the future crossing of the Sea of Reeds."⁸⁷ In other words, as a result of this word play, the Egyptian princess unknowingly foreshadows the baby's destiny.

The Egyptian princess's language of origin may spark debate over the intended meaning of Moses' name, but the fact that the word is defined elsewhere in the Tanach helps to define it here. The letters of Moses' name (מֹשֶׁה) have the same meaning of drawing out

⁸⁶ Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, 10.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

of water in several other places. For example, both 2 Samuel 22:17 and Psalm 18:17 read identically: "[God] reached down from on high, took me, and drew me out of the mighty waters [יְמִישְׁנִי מִמַּיִם רַבִּים]." Thus, the connection between מִשָּׁה and water is strong.

ANOTHER BE'ER OF BETROTHAL

Water appears next in Exodus 2:15-19, in Moses' betrothal scene. The text reads:

"...He arrived in the land of Midian, and sat down beside a well. Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters. They came to draw water, and filled the troughs to water their father's flock; but shepherds came and drove them off. Moses rose to their defense, and he watered their flock. When they returned to their father Reuel, he said, 'How is it that you have come back so soon today?' They answered, 'An Egyptian rescued us from the shepherds; he even drew water for us and watered the flock.'"

This scene resembles the other betrothal type-scenes in several ways. First, Moses meets women (one of whom will become his wife) at a well. The same is true for both Isaac (by proxy) and Jacob in Genesis 24 and 29, respectively. Moses also waters the women's flocks. Just as watering flocks in the two Genesis betrothal scenes is indicative of the personalities or experiences of the water-givers, the same is true of Moses here. Moses defends the women and gives the sheep water, because the habitual cruelty of others prevented the women from doing it themselves. This foreshadows Moses' role as a savior, for he will restore life to the Israelite people in Egypt, when the cruelty of the Egyptians threatens their survival. Like similar scenes in Genesis, the water in these verses serves a literal purpose as a necessity for survival of the flocks, but it also serves a symbolic function as a vehicle for restoring life to human beings and disclosing the character of the hero.

MAYIM FOR MAGIC

In Exodus 3, Moses encounters God at Mount Horeb and begins to receive instructions for leading the Israelites out of Egypt. Then, in Exodus 4, God gives Moses the tools to convince the people to follow his lead. After turning Moses' staff into a snake and inflicting and healing an instant case of *tzara'at*⁸⁸ on Moses' hand, God describes a third magic trick involving water. Exodus 4:9 reads: "And if they are not convinced by both these signs and still do not heed you, take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground, and it – the water that you take from the Nile – will turn to blood on the dry ground."

The water in this verse is similar to that of the Genesis Flood waters, in that both instances demonstrate God's absolute power. If God can change the substance of the Nile, a force of nature with such imposing size and power, God can do anything. Just as God can create life and order from chaos by controlling water in Genesis, in this case, God can threaten life and impose chaos by controlling water. Furthermore, this spectacular act affirms God's superiority over all other "gods" in Egypt. As Sarna explains: "The Nile – the life-blood of Egypt – was deified; thus, this sign, like the first, signifies God's sovereign rule over nature and the subordination of Egypt and its so-called gods to YHVH."⁸⁹ This act foreshadows the first of the ten plagues, in which God will do exactly as is described here: turn the water of the Nile into blood.

That plague is the context for the next use of water, in Exodus 7:15-24. In these verses, God gives Moses and Aaron instructions for visiting Pharaoh, and God describes the plague that will occur. God says in Exodus 7:15, "Go to Pharaoh in the morning, as he is coming out to the water, and station yourself before him at the edge of the Nile, taking with

⁸⁸ A scaly skin disease resembling leprosy.

⁸⁹ Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, 21.

you the rod that turned into a snake.” Exodus 8:16 echoes this verse, as it states: “Early in the morning, present yourself to Pharaoh, as he is coming out to the water.” It is unclear exactly why Pharaoh would be coming out to the water in the morning. Sarna hypothesizes that, “perhaps it involved some ceremony associated with his morning rituals, or it may be for worship of the god of the Nile.”⁹⁰ Regardless of why Pharaoh would be there, his presence beside the water adds a dramatic effect to the scene. He will be assured that it is not the idea of water or the memory of water that will be impacted, but the very water that is in front of his eyes.

In Exodus 7:17-18, God describes the nature of the first plague, saying: “¹⁷... By this you shall know that I am Adonai.’ See, I shall strike the water in the Nile with the rod that is in my hand, and it will be turned into blood; ¹⁸and the fish in the Nile will die. The Nile will stink so that the Egyptians will find it impossible to drink the water of the Nile.” Then, verses 20-24 describe the actual event, saying:

²⁰Moses and Aaron did just as Adonai commanded: he lifted up the rod and struck the water in the Nile in the sight of Pharaoh and his courtiers, and all the water in the Nile was turned into blood ²¹and the fish in the Nile died. The Nile stank so that the Egyptians could not drink water from the Nile; and there was blood throughout the land of Egypt. ²²But when the Egyptian magicians did the same with their spells, Pharaoh’s heart stiffened and he did not heed them—as Adonai had spoken. ²³Pharaoh turned and went into his palace, paying no regard even to this. ²⁴And all the Egyptians had to dig round about the Nile for drinking water, because they could not drink the water of the Nile.”

Again, like the Flood, this plague is another example of how, under God’s control, water can be both a demonstration of God’s supreme power and a vehicle for death and destruction. Yet, this feat is different from the Flood in that it seems more like a magic trick than a

⁹⁰ Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, 39.

profound act of nature.⁹¹ Its association with the rod that turned into the snake and Moses' sudden skin affliction underscore this distinction.

As the first of the ten plagues, striking the Nile could be seen as direct retribution for Pharaoh's decree of infanticide. Just as Pharaoh uses the Nile as an instrument of death by ordering all newborn males be cast into the water, God uses it as an instrument of death. Not only does God make it undrinkable, but God also kills the animals within it that serve as a food source.

The Nile is also the source of the second plague. Exodus 7:28 states that "the Nile shall swarm with frogs."⁹² Here, water is again a source of chaos that ensues. It is important to not that, in both the first and the second plague, it is not only the Nile that is affected. In Exodus 7:19, Aaron is instructed to hold his arm over "the waters of Egypt - its rivers, its canals, its ponds, all its bodies of water—that they may turn to blood; there shall be blood throughout the land of Egypt." Similarly, Exodus 8:1 reads: "Adonai said to Moses, 'Say to Aaron: Hold out your arm with the rod over the rivers, the canals, and the ponds, and bring up the frogs on the land of Egypt.' Aaron held out his arm over the waters of Egypt, and the frogs came up and covered the land of Egypt." Not only the Nile, but *all* bodies of water turn

⁹¹ Sarna explains that this apparent magic trick could have been a plausible event, according to scientific research of the region. "This plague has been explained as the extreme intensification of a well-known phenomenon that occurs periodically in the Nile valley. The river is fed by melting snow and summer rains that pour down from the highlands of Ethiopia and carry with them sediment from the tropical red earth that characterizes the region. Following from this explanation, the plague must have resulted from an abnormally heavy rainfall that led to an excessively high rise of the Nile and washed down inordinate amounts of the red sediment." Apparently, this red sediment could have halted the flow of the river, giving it a bloody hue, and when combined with bacteria that would have washed down from high mountain lakes, this could have disturbed the oxygen balance and killed off the fish, producing a foul odor.⁹¹ Regardless of a naturalistic explanation, the text demonstrates God's power. The "blood" of the Nile may have been a natural phenomenon, but God could have set it in motion. [Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, 38-39.]

⁹² This phenomenon might have been directly related to the first. Sarna explains that the frogs would have concentrated in wet areas, such as the Nile, during their reproductive period. But, since their habitat would have become polluted by the putrefying fish, the frogs would have been forced to invade the land. [Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, 40.]

to blood and produce massive hordes of frogs. Thus, while both plagues may strike the Nile first, and perhaps have the greatest impact there, their impact on water in Egypt is pervasive. To begin to punish Pharaoh, God strikes his water sources. This underscores the Egyptians' utter dependency on water for survival, and how its absence or contamination would have been nothing short of devastating.

Water appears next in Exodus 10:19, in relation to the eighth plague, the locusts. After Pharaoh pleads with Moses and Aaron for relief from the swarming insects, God causes a "very strong sea wind, which lifted the locusts and hurled them into the יַם סוּף." This is the first time the *Yam Suf* is mentioned in the Torah. It is frequently translated as either "Sea of Reeds" or "Red Sea," and I will discuss its translation at greater length later. The *Yam Suf* will play the most critical role of all forms of water in the Exodus narrative, as it is this "sea" that will later part to give the Israelites passage to freedom. Perhaps its use here is meant to introduce this body of water in the vicinity of Pharaoh's kingdom, as a prelude of what is yet to come.

DEATH AND DELIVERY

"for whatever we lose (like a you or a me)
it's always ourselves we find in the sea"

- e.e. cummings

The fact that this Book is titled "Exodus" in English (rather than "Names," which is the translation of its Hebrew title שְׁמוֹת) reflects the importance of the narrative of the Israelite liberation from Egypt to the entire Torah. This central theme of redemption is mentioned no less than one hundred and twenty times in the Hebrew Bible.⁹³ The account is

⁹³ Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, xii.

theologically significant because it demonstrates God's deep concern for Israel and God's direct involvement in human affairs. But it is also existentially significant, as it marks a critical identity transformation for the People of Israel. As a result of the dramatic and traumatic parting of the sea, the nation of Israel is born. Or, to paraphrase e.e. cummings, with God's help, the Israelites "find themselves in the sea."

In preparation for the famous sea-parting, the narrative returns to the *Yam Suf* immediately after the plague episodes. Exodus 13:18 reads: "God led the people roundabout, by way of the wilderness at the *Yam Suf*. And the Israelites went up armed out of the land of Egypt." Again, the use of its proper name may indicate that it is an important site, but the *Yam Suf* here also serves as a point of reference for the Israelites on their journey. Not only does it mark their movement, it is also important because the Israelites will change course and turn back to "the sea" in the opening verses of Chapter 14. Its proper name in 13:18 indicates that it is this particular body of water to which they will return.

In Exodus 14:2, the Israelites are instructed "to turn back and encamp before Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, before Baal-zephon; you shall encamp facing it, by the sea." And, in 14:9, "the Egyptians gave chase to them, and all the chariot horses of Pharaoh, his horsemen, and his warriors overtook them encamped by the sea, near Pi-hahiroth, before Baal-zephon." Sarna claims that this change of course was an intentional stratagem to lure the Egyptians to their doom.⁹⁴

Several verses later, God executes that doom through the vehicle of water. Yet, just as water is a source of both death and life in Genesis, it is also a source of both death and life

⁹⁴ Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, 70.

here. The very same water that brings destruction to the Egyptians brings salvation to the Israelites. Exodus 14:21-30 reads:

“²¹Then Moses held out his arm over the sea and Adonai drove back the sea with a strong east wind all that night, and turned the sea into dry ground. The waters were split, ²²and the Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. ²³The Egyptians came in pursuit after them into the sea, all of Pharaoh’s horses, chariots, and horsemen. ²⁴At the morning watch, Adonai looked down upon the Egyptian army from a pillar of fire and cloud, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. ²⁵He locked the wheels of their chariots so that they moved forward with difficulty. And the Egyptians said, ‘Let us flee from the Israelites, for Adonai is fighting for them against Egypt.’ ²⁶Then Adonai said to Moses, ‘Hold out your arm over the sea, that the waters may come back upon the Egyptians and upon their chariots and upon their horsemen.’ ²⁷Moses held out his arm over the sea, and at daybreak the sea returned to its normal state, and the Egyptians fled at its approach. But Adonai hurled the Egyptians into the sea. ²⁸The waters turned back and covered the chariots and the horsemen—Pharaoh’s entire army that followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. ²⁹But the Israelites had marched through the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. ³⁰Thus Adonai delivered Israel that day from the Egyptians. Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the shore of the sea.”

Here, water is the site of miraculous events, serving as evidence of God’s supreme power.

Moses plays an important role as an intermediary between the natural and supernatural realms, or perhaps as an appendage of God, but the text makes it clear that it is God who is the effective cause of the sea splitting. It is God who controls nature, and God who has the power to effect either destruction or salvation. That God chooses *water* to effect this salvation is significant. It is water, not any other substance, which God manipulates and uses as the medium for granting life to Israel. And, because the parting of the sea is so significant, it becomes a paradigm for the future redemption of Israel from exile.

It is the celebration of life, rather than the death of the Egyptians, that is most often remembered from this scene. As Sarna notes, “remarkably, the overwhelming majority of the texts that celebrate the crossing of the sea relate solely to God’s sovereign control over

nature and history and do not mention the drowning of the Egyptians.”⁹⁵ Strong birth and creation imagery also emphasize the focus on life in this passage. Just as there are strong connections between women and water throughout the Torah, water itself is a metaphor for a fertile womb, or perhaps a symbol of amniotic fluid. Thus, passage of the Israelites to the promise of life on the far shores of the sea conveys an image of rebirth for the Israelites. In addition, the Hebrew word for Egypt – מִצְרַיִם – is also associated with labor pains.⁹⁶ Its root, צַר, is used in such a way in Jeremiah 6:24, 49:24, and 50:43. Emerging from the *Yam Suf* is the equivalent of emerging from the womb, not to new life, but to life renewed.

Water imagery here also parallels the Creation narrative of Genesis. In Genesis 1:6-9, God separates “water from water” and gathers water in order to create space for dry land. Similarly, in Exodus 14:21-22, God separates the waters of the sea in order to create dry land on which the Israelites could cross safely. Both narratives involve God controlling and moving water for the purpose of completing a “creative” act. In addition, just as a “רוח אלהים” – a wind of God – hovers over the water in Genesis 1:2, it is a “רוח קָדִים” – a strong east wind – that drives back the waters of the sea in Exodus 14:21, or a “רוח אֶפְרַיִם” – a wind of God’s nostrils – that piles up the waters of the sea in Exodus 15:8. As stated previously, the wind-over-water motif may serve to reinforce the cosmic order, to emphasize that God’s power surpasses even the strongest forces of nature. William H. Propp summarizes these parallels well. He states that the crossing of the sea is “the locus of the creation of the nation under the sovereignty of Yahweh,” and that it is “associated with the mythic conquest of the

⁹⁵ Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, 70.

⁹⁶ Drorah O’Donnell Setel, “Exodus.” *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsome and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 33.

primordial sea and the assumption of sovereignty over the dry land by Yahweh.”⁹⁷ These reminders of Genesis support the notion that this significant event signals a new beginning for the Israelite people: the birth of a nation.

Birth imagery highlights another important role that water plays, namely, that of a symbolic boundary to be crossed. Much like Jacob’s crossing of the Jabbok in Genesis 32, this is a crossing that marks identity transformation. In Genesis 32, Jacob shifts from being completely self-centered to expanding his focus to include the well-being of others, and in Exodus 14, the Israelites shift from both slavery to freedom, and from individual to communal destiny. As Propp writes: “In Exodus 14-15, as in the Jabbok incident (Gen. 32:22-32), the initiate crosses a body of water tangibly separating the old life from the new.”⁹⁸ Jacob’s transformative tussle with the mysterious “שׂנִי” takes place *beside* water, and the redemption of the Israelites takes place *through* water. Both require a fluid frontier.

RED, REED OR RUIN?

We must infer that the “sea” mentioned throughout the events of Chapter 14, is the *Yam Suf*. Not only is this the only body of water mentioned in relation to the Israelites’ journey (Ex. 13:18), but the “Song of the Sea” in Exodus 15:1-21, which recaps the miraculous sea splitting events, specifically calls the sea the *Yam Suf*, as 15:4 reads: “Pharaoh’s chariots and his army God has cast into the sea; and the pick of his officers are drowned in the *Yam Suf*.” Immediately following the song, 15:22 also reads: “Moses caused Israel to set out from the *Yam Suf*.” In addition, the sea that parted for the Israelites is

⁹⁷ William Henry Propp, *Water in the Wilderness: A Biblical Motif and its Mythological Background* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 1.

⁹⁸ William H.C. Propp, *Exodus 1-18*. The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 565.

consistently referred to as the *Yam Suf* in later Biblical verses, including Deuteronomy 11:4, Joshua 2:10, 4:23, 24:6, Psalm 106:7, 9, 22, Psalm 136:13-15, and Nehemiah 9:9. Thus, we can conclude that all of the events of Chapters 14-15 take place at this particular body of water.

I hesitate to call this sea a geographic landmark, because its geographic specificity lacks conclusive evidence, at least for modern readers. Sarna suggests that it might have existed in the northeastern corner of Egypt, and perhaps referred to a lagoon near the shore of the Mediterranean Sea.⁹⁹ However, Thomas B. Dozeman states that, "some have argued that *Yam Suf* was originally a mythological term devoid of geographical specificity."¹⁰⁰ Bernard Batto, on the other hand, proposes a kind of integration of the two theories. In his article "Red Sea or Reed Sea? How the Mistake was Made and What *Yam Suf* really Means," he suggests that there are some times in the Bible when *Yam Suf* refers to a specific geographic body of water, and other times when it is a symbolic, mythological sea. He sides more with Dozeman, however, when it comes to the particular Biblical passages referring to the Israelites' miraculous sea crossing. Batto writes: "When it refers to the body of water that engulfed the Egyptians after the Israelites passed through, it has a symbolic meaning. Elsewhere it refers to a particular body of water, the Red Sea."¹⁰¹

Yam Suf is often translated both as "Red Sea" and "Sea of Reeds." There are appropriate reasons for both translations. Batto argues that, in a number of instances in the Torah, *Yam Suf* clearly refers to the body of water we know as the Red Sea. Among others, he cites 1 Kings 9:26, where "King Solomon built a fleet of ships at Ezion-Geber near Eilat

⁹⁹ Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, 69.

¹⁰⁰ Thomas B. Dozeman, "The Yam-Suf in the Exodus and the Crossing of the Jordan River." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 58 J1 (1996).

¹⁰¹ Bernard F. Batto, "Red Sea or Reed Sea? How the Mistake was Made and What *Yam Suf* really Means." *Biblical Archaeology Review* 10, 4 (1984), 62.

on the shore of the *Yam Suf* in the land of Edom,” and notes that, “from the other geographical references, it is absolutely clear that *Yam Suf* refers to the northeastern finger of the Red Sea, known today as the Gulf of Eilat or the Gulf of Aqaba.”¹⁰² In this verse, and in others where contextual geographic evidence makes it clear that the body of water being referenced is the Red Sea, one could certainly translate *Yam Suf* as “Red Sea.”

Yet, the Biblical context does not always fit the geography of this particular body of water, as is the case in Exodus 14-15. Batto points out that the Red Sea “is at minimum five days’ travel from the sea the Israelites miraculously passed through.”¹⁰³ Furthermore, one cannot ignore the obvious problem that *Yam Suf* does not translate to “Red Sea.” Rather, יָם סוּף literally means “reed” in Hebrew, hence the other common translation, “Sea of Reeds.” This could describe a body of water known for having many reeds either within it or around it, in this case, more of a marsh than a sea. In addition, the term allegedly fits the geography of Exodus 14-15, as it involves a body of water that could dry up under the force of a heavy wind.¹⁰⁴ The problem, however, with consistently translating *Yam Suf* as “Sea of Reeds,” is twofold. First, as stated above, there are some Biblical passages that contain indisputable geographic references to the Red Sea; and second, as Batto points out, there are absolutely no reeds in the salty waters of the Red Sea. He writes, “the ancients would surely not apply *Yam Suf* to what we call the Red Sea if *Yam Suf* were intended to refer to reeds.”¹⁰⁵

All of these arguments present a translation and geographic quandary. In addition, they seem to render the meaning of “*Yam Suf*” not only inconsistent throughout the Torah, but ambiguous in the case of the Israelites’ miraculous sea crossing. However, it is possible

¹⁰² Batto, 57.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 59.

that *Yam Suf* is neither inconsistent nor ambiguous. It may be true that there are times when the term refers to the Red Sea, and others when it does not. A third translation of *Yam Suf* can be construed. It encompasses both its historical, geographic meaning and develops its mythological, symbolic meaning.

In such an interpretation, rather than reading יָם סוּף as "reed," one could read it as a derivative of יָמָה, which means "end" in Hebrew. Thus, *Yam Suf* could be translated as "Sea of the End," or "Sea of Extinction." It could also be translated as "Sea at the End of the World." In this latter sense, it may be applied geographically to the Red Sea and what lay beyond it, as Norman Snaith claims that *Yam Suf* refers to "that distant scarcely known sea away to the south, of which no man knew the boundary. It was the sea at the end of the land."¹⁰⁶ In other words, in the ancient Near Eastern mindset, life beyond the Red Sea was unimaginable. Thus, *Yam Suf* makes for an appropriate name for such a significant physical boundary.

Yam Suf as "Sea of the End" or "Sea of Extinction" is appropriate for its use in Exodus 14-15, where *Yam Suf* is more mythological than historical. As Dozeman notes, "the primary function of the phrase 'Sea of Extinction' in the Song of the Sea is that of describing the destruction of the Egyptians."¹⁰⁷ It is this body of water in which the Egyptians meet their end. Or, as Batto writes, it is "the 'place' where non-Creation or nonexistence begins.... A more powerful symbol of nonexistence can scarcely be found than submergence into the Sea of End/Annihilation."¹⁰⁸ Defining *Yam Suf* in such a way also serves as a reminder that this particular body of water has the potential to mark the end of the Israelites, but ultimately

¹⁰⁶ Batto, 59.

¹⁰⁷ Dozeman.

¹⁰⁸ Batto, 60-61.

sparers them from extinction. Thus, the geographic specificity of the sea is of little importance in these chapters, as the significance of the sea is mythological, rather than historical.

SONG OF THE SEA

Mythological associations are particularly strong in the “Song of the Sea” in Exodus 15:1-21. These associations are not only about mythological “endings” but mythological “beginnings,” as well. The context of the Song is about creation mythology. As Batto writes: “Traditional mythical language is used to express the belief that the emergence of Israel as a people during the exodus was due to a creative act by Yahweh equal to that of the original creation of the cosmos itself.”¹⁰⁹ Evidence for this conclusion includes the use of *tehom* in Exodus 15:5, which reads: “תְּהוֹמוֹת יָבֵס יָמוֹ” – “the deeps covered them” – and Exodus 15:8, which reads: “קָפְאוּ תְהוֹמוֹת בְּלֶב-יָם” – “the deeps froze in the heart of the sea.” *Tehom*, as we know, is a reference to the powerful primordial waters of Creation first mentioned in Genesis 1:2. Because this term is so seldom used in the Torah, its appearance is significant and its resonance with the theme of creation is undeniable.

Exodus 15:4-5 underscores this emphasis on a return to Creation, as it reads: “Pharaoh’s chariots and his army [God] has cast into the sea; and the pick of his officers are drowned in the *Yam Suf*. The deeps covered them; they went down into the depths like a stone.” Regarding these verses, Dozeman writes, “the result is a progression from ‘the sea’ to the *Yam Suf*, and finally to the great primeval Sea.”¹¹⁰ In other words, these verses signify

¹⁰⁹ Batto, 60-61.

¹¹⁰ Dozeman.

a reversal of time and, ultimately, of Creation. This is similar to the Flood narrative in Genesis 6-8, which is also a reversal of Creation, and which also evokes the primordial waters of *tehom*.

Another significant name for water appears in Exodus 15:10. This is “מַיִם אֲדִירִים,” or “majestic waters.” This is the only time this particular term appears in the Torah. The same term does reappear, however, in Psalm 93:4, which mentions “מַיִם רַבִּים אֲדִירִים.” This “might” refers to the power of God in the Psalm, and to the strength of the waters that drowned the Egyptians in Exodus 15, but, as Sarna asserts, it also alludes to the cosmic ocean.¹¹¹ In other words, verse 10 reinforces the notion that God summons the primordial waters to save the Israelites and to defeat the Egyptians.

Just as God’s control of water in Genesis 1 and Genesis 6-8 signify the dominance of order over the forces of chaos, so, too, does God’s control and maneuvering of the waters of the *Yam Suf* in Exodus 14-15 reinforce this theme. As Propp notes, “the ocean was a remnant of the uncreated universe, a disquieting reminder of chaos threatening the habitable realm.”¹¹² This is particularly true of the *Yam Suf*, the “Sea of the End,” a body of water with a name fraught with connotations of the dangers of primeval chaos. Thus, God’s power control of the *Yam Suf* emphasizes God’s power over chaos.

The Genesis 1 account of Creation resembles other ancient Near Eastern creation myths in its use of water as a force of chaos that must be controlled or tamed. But, unlike other local creation myths, *tehom* in Genesis is not personified, and Genesis involves no combat scene between God and another power. Exodus 15, however, does contain the combat motif. Evidence includes verse 3, which calls God an “אִישׁ מִלְחָמָה” – a “warrior” –

¹¹¹ Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, 79.

¹¹² Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 557.

and verse 9, in which the enemy is quoted as saying, “אֶרֶיק חֶרֶב־י” – “I will bare my sword.” Significantly, this combat is not with the water itself, but, rather, with the gods of the Egyptians. Not only does water represent a threat of chaos, but the Egyptians do, as well. As Batto writes, “the struggle against Pharaoh is portrayed as part of the larger battle of the deity against the powers of chaos; Pharaoh is identified with those chaotic powers and is destroyed with them.”¹¹³ God’s supremacy reveals not only a conquest of chaos, but also God’s superiority over all other deities.

Shirat HaYam is appropriately named, as it is absolutely clear that water is a central theme of the Song. Both the language of the poem and the structure of the song support this notion. For example, throughout these twenty-two verses, *yam* appears nine times, *mayim* is mentioned three times, and *tehom* is used twice. There are also five verses that end with the word “*yam*,” including both the first and last verses of the song, emphasizing the importance of water. The structure, or physical layout of the words, is also an indication of emphasis. The words are spaced out in such a way that they resemble bricks of a wall. This evokes Exodus 14:22, which reads: “and the Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left,” and Exodus 15:8, which reads: “the flood stood straight like a wall.” Another interpretation of this word layout is that the ebb and flow of the words on the page resembles the waves of the sea. Either way, the aesthetic impact of the literary unit is undoubtedly intended to evoke strong water imagery.

The Song of the Sea concludes with what is commonly called the Song of Miriam, as Miriam leads the women in song at the shore of the sea in Exodus 15:20-21. Her words bring to a close not only the Song of the Sea, but also the collective events of Chapters 2-15,

¹¹³ Batto, 61.

which follow Moses' life in Egypt from his birth through his paramount leadership experience. Back in Exodus 2, the connection between women and water is strong: Moses' mother puts him in a *tevah* in the Nile (2:3); His sister watches Moses near the Nile (2:4); Pharaoh's daughter bathes in the Nile and her maidens walk beside the Nile (2:5); Pharaoh's daughter discovers Moses in the Nile (2:5-6); Pharaoh's daughter gives Moses a name that relates to water (2:10); and Moses meets the seven daughters of the priest of Midian, including Tziphora, at a well (2:15-21). Thus, it is appropriate that, in Exodus 15, as the scene of the pre-eminent water experience of Moses and the Israelites draws to a close, women should not only be present, but a woman should play a prominent role. As a woman frequently associated with water, Miriam singing at the seashore serves as a fitting bookend. Having midwived Israel's birth into a nation, the women and water fade as the people enter the Wilderness.

CHAPTER THREE

WATER IN THE WILDERNESS

"What makes the desert beautiful is that it somewhere hides a well."

- Antoine de Saint-Exupery

THE POWER OF PROVIDENCE

After the Song of Miriam, the scene changes significantly, but water continues to play an important role. In leaving Egypt, Israel leaves the easy access to water, fertility and safety that Egypt represented. From here on, salvific water – both pragmatic and symbolic – becomes much harder to obtain, and becomes a source of conflict and testing. This stage in Israel's story is known as the Wilderness Journey.

Exodus 15:22-27 describes the initial stations in the wilderness and includes the episodes at Marah and Elim. In these six verses, מַיִם appears six times, demonstrating the centrality of water. Exodus 15:22-27 reads:

²²Then Moses caused Israel to set out from the *Yam Suf*. They went on into the wilderness of Shur; they traveled three days in the wilderness and found no water. ²³They came to Marah, but they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter; that is why it was named Marah. ²⁴And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?" ²⁵So he cried out to Adonai, and Adonai showed him a piece of wood; he threw it into the water and the water became sweet. There [God] made for them a fixed rule, and there [God] put them to the test. ²⁶[God] said, "If you will heed Adonai your God diligently, doing what is upright in [God's] sight, giving ear to [God's] commandments and keeping all [God's] laws, then I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians, for I Adonai am your healer. ²⁷And they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees; an they encamped there beside the water."

The mention of *Yam Suf* in verse 22 serves as a point of reference to verify that the previous events took place at this particular location, and also serves as a transition, indicating that the sea crossing event is over, and another event is about to begin. In contrast to the *Yam Suf*, a place with abundant water that assures the Israelites' survival, they arrive at a place that lacks suitable water, threatening their survival.

The undrinkable waters of Marah parallel the undrinkable waters of the Nile in the narrative of the first plague.¹¹⁴ There, of course, God turns the Nile to blood in Exodus 7:17-18. Just as God controls the quality of the water of the Nile, God controls the quality of the water here at Marah. As Robinson states: "No sooner has [Israel] escaped from pursuing Egyptians than she is in danger of death by thirst. She finds water, but it is rendered drinkable only by a divine interposition."¹¹⁵

As if it were necessary to demonstrate God's salvific powers after the miraculous sea crossing, the sweetening of the water in verse 25 is further evidence of God's ability to provide both water and life. In addition, the springs at Elim can be viewed as revitalizing gifts from God. As Fishbane writes, "in the biblical worldview...natural springs are ultimately the bounty of [God] – the supernatural source of sustenance and salvation."¹¹⁶ These mark the first instance of what Propp calls the "water in the wilderness" motif. The mythological significance of this motif "demonstrates the deity's power to sustain human, animal and vegetable life in the most inhospitable climes by the gift of water."¹¹⁷

The inhospitable setting of the wilderness has its own mythological significance. Just as the provision of water signifies God's power, the opposing presence of the wilderness – not *tehom* – now represents the threat of chaos. This echoes Creation themes from Genesis. As Francis Klopfer writes: "Immeasurable stretched-out spaces like the ocean and the desert, to their mind's eye had no boundaries and were therefore orderless and feared as powers of

¹¹⁴ Bernard P. Robinson, "Symbolism in Exodus 15:22-27 (Marah and Elim)," *Revue Biblique* 94, 3 (1987), 377. [Quoting U. Cassuto's *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem, 1967), 184.]

¹¹⁵ Robinson, 377.

¹¹⁶ Fishbane, 5.

¹¹⁷ Propp, *Water in the Wilderness*, 2.

chaos."¹¹⁸ Whereas water is a symbol of chaos elsewhere in the Torah, water is the force that tames chaos in the desert.

Assuaging thirst through the transformation of water assures the Israelites that God has both the power and the disposition to furnish drinking water and assist people in desperate situations. A similar transforming miracle of water occurs in 2 Kings 2:19-22.¹¹⁹ The particular demonstrations of divine power in Exodus 15:22-27 are not directed to all of humanity, but rather, they reveal a unique relationship between God and the Israelites. God provides for them not only immediately following the Exodus from Egypt, but the water in the wilderness also foreshadows what lies ahead for the Israelites on their journey. According to Propp, "the provision of water in the desert contains a promise of water, i.e. fertility, in Canaan."¹²⁰ This refers both to the fertility of the land, and the fertility of the people, as Abraham's promise of progeny continues to become manifest. The connection between water and fertility has been strong throughout the Torah, and it is a significant metaphor here, as well.

The "water in the wilderness" motif thus contains three levels of association: the mythic, the historical, and the contemporary. According to Propp, the mythic level refers to connections to Creation, and suggests that God irrigates the entire world. The historical level refers to the desert wandering following the Exodus, where the people seek and are given water to drink. The contemporary level refers to the time of the text, during which Canaan is

¹¹⁸ Klopfer, 255.

¹¹⁹ 2Kings 2:19-22: "The men of the town said to Elisha: 'Look, the town is a pleasant place to live in, as my lord can see; but the water is bad and the land causes bereavement.' He responded: 'Bring me a new dish and put salt in it.' They brought it to him; he went to the spring and threw salt into it. And he said: 'Thus said Adonai: I heal this water; no longer shall death and bereavement come from it!' The water has remained wholesome to this day, in accordance with the word spoken by Elisha."

¹²⁰ Propp, *Water in the Wilderness*, 3.

fertilized.¹²¹ These various levels of association reinforce the fact that water serves both concrete and metaphoric functions in the Torah.

Together, the episodes at Marah and Elim exemplify this duality perfectly. Not only do they use water as a tangible drinking substance, but they also contain significant symbolism. Robinson offers a type of *midrashic* interpretation: "The tree cast into the waters of Marah is the Torah; the seventy palms stand for the collective immortality of the people; the twelve springs for the gift of life and salvation which obedience to the Torah will bestow."¹²² As demonstrated numerous times before, water at Marah and Elim has life-giving power, and indeed, represents life. God remains the provider of life, but, according to Robinson, there is suddenly a new method of assuring this gift, namely, obedience to Torah. He writes:

"The Torah is what gives access to that perennial source of life which lies at the heart of the universe. Without the Torah, one's fate is akin to that of men dying of thirst in the desert; or tormented by the presence of undrinkable water; or subjected to the plagues of Egypt. YHWH, however, is Israel's source of life and healing; provided she passes the test of acceptance of the Torah she will attain her destiny."¹²³

One can see links to Robinson's reading in Exodus 23:25, where water appears explicitly as the reward for fidelity to the covenant ("You shall serve Adonai your God, and [God] will bless your bread and your water"). The dependence on drinkable water for survival amplifies the importance of a strong commitment to God. Both verses indicate that, through devotion to God, the Israelites can gain access to water, which serves as both the gift of life and evidence of God's supreme power.

¹²¹ Propp, *Water in the Wilderness*, 125.

¹²² Robinson, 376.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 388.

STRIKING THE STONE

The miraculous "water in the wilderness" motif continues in Chapter 17 of Exodus.

There, an episode similar to that at Marah and Elim takes place. Exodus 17:1-6 reads:

"¹From the wilderness of Sin the whole Israelite community continued by stages as Adonai would command. They encamped at Rephidim, and there was no water for the people to drink. ²The people quarreled with Moses. 'Give us water to drink,' they said; and Moses replied to them, 'Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you try Adonai?' ³But the people thirsted there for water; and the people grumbled against Moses and said, 'Why did you bring us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?' ⁴Moses cried out to Adonai, saying, 'What shall I do with this people? Before long they will be stoning me!' ⁵Then Adonai said to Moses, 'Pass before the people; take with you some of the elders of Israel, and take along the rod with which you struck the Nile, and set out. ⁶I will be standing there before you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock and water will issue from it, and the people will drink.' And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷The place was named Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and because they tried Adonai, saying, 'Is Adonai present among us or not?'"

The episode at Massah-Meribah differs from Exodus 15:22-27, in that it describes rebellion and doubt on the part of the Israelites. Yet, these verses resemble the previous ones in that they describe a lack of water followed by a miraculous provision of water from God.¹²⁴

The episode at Massah-Meribah is referred to repeatedly throughout the Tanakh. It is mentioned again in Numbers 20:24 and 27:14, Deuteronomy 6:16, 9:22, 32:51, and 33:8, and Psalms 81:8, 95:8 and 106:32. In addition, Numbers 20:2-13 includes not only a mention of the "waters of Meribah," but describes what appears to be a very similar experience. The text reads:

¹²⁴ This water flow may be the result a natural phenomenon. According to Sarna, the "rock" may have been soft porous limestone, which has high-water-retaining capacity. "A sharp blow to such rock," he writes, "may crack its crust and release a flow of groundwater." [Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, 94.] Like the splitting of the *Yam Suf*, obtaining water from a rock could be explained by a natural phenomenon. But, a scientific hypothesis does not detract from the notion that God is the cause of such remarkable events. Whether God moves the waters directly, or creates the natural forces that set the waters in motion, God remains the source.

²The community was without water, and they joined against Moses and Aaron. ³The people quarreled with Moses, saying, 'If only we had perished when our brothers perished at the instance of Adonai! ⁴Why have you brought Adonai's congregation into this wilderness for us and our beasts to die there? ⁵Why did you make us leave Egypt to bring us to this wretched place, a place with no grain or figs or vines or pomegranates? There is not even water to drink!' ⁶Moses and Aaron came away from the congregation to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and fell on their faces. The Presence of Adonai appeared to them, ⁷and Adonai spoke to Moses, saying, ⁸'You and your brother Aaron take the rod and assemble the community, and before their very eyes order the rock to yield its water. Thus you shall produce water for them from the rock and provide drink for the congregation and their beasts.' ⁹Moses took the rod from before Adonai, as he had been commanded. ¹⁰Moses and Aaron assembled the congregation in front of the rock; and he said to them: 'Listen, you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock?' ¹¹And Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod. Out came copious water, and the community and their beasts drank. ¹²But Adonai said to Moses and Aaron, 'Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm My sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people, therefore you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them.' ¹³Those are the Waters of Meribah, meaning that the Israelites quarreled with Adonai, through which [God's] sanctity was affirmed."

The remarkable parallels in both content and style between Exodus 17 and Numbers 20 have led many critics to hypothesize that the two passages actually describe the same incident. The repetitions of the names "Massah" and "Meribah" in the verses mentioned above lend support to this theory. For example, Deuteronomy 9:22 reads: "Again you provoked [Adonai] at Taberah, and at Massah, and at Kibroth-hattaavah." Levine points out that the first and third sites are reported in Numbers 11:3 and 11:34, whereas Massah is the name given to the rock in Exodus 17:7. He says this is "another indication that the two incidents of water from the rock are one and the same."¹²⁵ Moreover, Deuteronomy 33:8 includes the phrase: "whom You tested at Massah, challenged at the waters of Meribah." According to Milgrom, this is a poetic line that consists of parallel clauses. Therefore, "the sites for the rock incidents in Exodus and Numbers (Ex. 17:7; Num. 20:13) must be identical."¹²⁶ The fact

¹²⁵ Levine, 449.

¹²⁶ Jacob Milgrom, ed. *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1990), xvi.

that this episode is repeated in the Torah speaks to its significance. It emphasizes not only God's power to provide life-giving water, but also the importance of a trusting covenantal relationship between God and the Israelite people.

These two passages may, indeed, be variants of the same incident, but they are not portrayed identically. A key difference exists in both the manner of obtaining water, and the ramifications of doing so. Something about Moses' actions in the Numbers version angers God greatly, as Moses is punished severely: he is prohibited from entering the Promised Land. Most translations of Numbers 20:8 convey that Moses and Aaron are commanded to "speak to the rock." This would mean that in Exodus, Moses is told to strike the rock to obtain water, while in Numbers, he is to speak to it. A traditional explanation for Moses' punishment is that Moses incurs God's wrath by striking the rock rather than speaking to it. Yet, there are several arguments to refute this claim. First, it is unlikely that Moses failed to "sanctify" God in striking the rock when Exodus 17 communicates clearly that it is a miracle to draw forth water by striking. Second, as Milgrom writes: "Why would Moses be told at the beginning of this text to 'take the rod' if not for the purpose of using it?"¹²⁷ If striking the rock is not Moses' sin, his transgression must lie elsewhere.

Milgrom claims that the Numbers 20:8 was altered, and that originally, it contained the command to "strike the rock" rather than "speak to it." He suggests that "וַיִּדְבֹּרֵם" – "and speak" – was inserted incorrectly in order to match Moses' actions in 21:10b.¹²⁸ For this reason, Milgrom translates this phrase to read "and order," meaning that Moses and Aaron are simply instructed to summon the water to come forth, presumably by striking the rock. If

¹²⁷ Milgrom, *JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, 449.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 451.

Milgrom is correct, Moses is not commanded to speak, but Moses *does* speak before striking the rock. Therefore, Moses' sin is in his speaking.

What Moses says is important. In verse 10, Moses calls the people "rebels." Some suggest that this is his sin, because he loses his temper and denigrates his people. But the same verse contains another sin of speech that is even greater. Moses says:

"מִן־הַסֵּלֶעַ הַזֶּה נֹצִיא לָכֶם מַיִם" – "from this rock we shall draw forth water." Because

Moses says "נֹצִיא" – "shall we draw forth – rather than "נֹצֵא" – "[God] shall draw forth,"

Moses implies that what follows will be his miracle, not God's. This, of course, is a serious transgression. As Milgrom states: "In defying God, Moses did not merely countermand

God's order; indeed his behavior could be interpreted as a denial of God's essence. In the sight of the assembled throngs of Israel, Moses and Aaron missed the opportunity to 'sanctify God.'"¹²⁹

Moses' words may have been inappropriate, but his transgression may also lie in the fact that he speaks at all. Milgrom offers further evidence to support this assertion. He writes:

"The backdrop of pagan magic should suffice to explain why it cannot be that Moses was commanded to draw forth water from the rock by speaking to it. Had he addressed the rock, he would have committed the quintessential heresy: Those assembled would have taken his words as an incantation and him as a magician who performed the miracle by his own powers rather than by divine agency."¹³⁰

In other words, as the leader of a people struggling to find their own collective identity,

Moses has to differentiate himself, and the community, from the idolatrous pagan cultural

norms to which the Israelites are accustomed. In addition, he must continually demonstrate

both faith in God and humility before God, acknowledging that God is the source of life and

¹²⁹ Milgrom, *JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, 451.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 454.

blessing. Therefore, by speaking to the rock in the sight of the Israelites, resembling pagan practice and disregarding God's power, Moses commits his greatest sin.

Perhaps the expression of God's anger and Moses' punishment do not appear in Exodus, but do appear in Numbers, because the Israelites are farther from the miracle at the *Yam Suf*, and have begun to grumble more in their wilderness wandering. Moses is made an example, lest the people fail to recognize authentic "signs" of God's power, or mistake miracles for coincidences of nature. In both the Exodus and Numbers passages, it is water that reinforces the supremacy of God's power to sustain the Israelites, and it is the response to the gift of water that either offends or sanctifies God.

PRESENCE AND PROVISION

Water in the wilderness appears not only in the form of water gushing forth from rocks, but also as dew (טל). When the Israelites are grumbling of hunger in the desert, dew accompanies God's provision of food. Exodus 16:13-15 reads:

“¹³In the evening quail appeared and covered the camp; in the morning there was a fall of dew about the camp. ¹⁴When the fall of dew lifted, there, over the surface of the wilderness, lay a fine and flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. ¹⁵When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, ‘What is it?’ for they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, ‘That is the bread which Adonai has given you to eat.’”

Here, water functions differently than it does elsewhere. Unlike a river or a sea, dew comes gently, tenderly. It provides a softer kind of nourishment. Note that it is not the water itself that rescues the Israelites, but rather, the quail and manna that come with it. Dew appears in exactly the same way in Numbers 11:9, which reads: “When the dew fell on the camp at night, the manna would fall upon it.” In both cases, the dew is a sign of God's presence among the Israelites, and it is that gentle, tender presence that is the ultimate source of life.

In other words, it is not the water itself, but rather, what it signifies, that saves the Israelites. In case they should wonder from where their sustenance comes, the dew reminds the Israelites that God is their provider and partner.

Dew is not the only form of water that ushers in the arrival of much-needed food. The sea also provides nourishment. In Numbers 11:22 Moses acknowledges that the sea is a potential source of food, saying, "could all the fish of the sea be gathered for them to suffice them?" Numbers 11:31, on the other hand, describes the actual provision of food from the sea, as it reads: "³¹A wind from Adonai started up, swept quail from the sea and strewed them over the camp, about a day's journey on this side and about a day's journey on that side, all around the camp, and some two cubits deep on the ground."

GRUMBLING AND GRATITUDE

When such food is not provided, the Israelites grumble against God, taking previous gifts for granted. For example, Numbers 21:4-5 reads:

"⁴They set out from Mount Hor by way of the *Yam Suf* to skirt the land of Edom. But the people grew restive on the journey, ⁵and the people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why did you make us leave Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread and no water, and we have come to loathe this miserable food."

Milgrom claims that the "*Yam Suf*" here refers specifically to the Red Sea, based on the geography of the Israelite journey.¹³¹ Yet, this term may serve another purpose, as well. The term "*Yam Suf*" calls to mind the miraculous sea crossing out of Egypt. Its use may serve to highlight the dissimilarity between the episode in the wilderness and that of the Exodus from Egypt. In contrast to Egypt, the Israelites in the wilderness are ungrateful and contend that God does not adequately provide for them. For this defiance, they are punished with a

¹³¹ Milgrom, *JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, 173.

plague of snakes.¹³² Yet, their cry is also requited. In Numbers 21:16, God supplies water to the Israelites. And, because they learned a lesson from being punished for complaining, they sing a song of gratitude to God in verses 16-18. The text – in Hebrew and in its usual translation – reads:

וּמִשָּׁם בְּאֵרָהּ הָיָא הַבְּאֵר אֲשֶׁר אָמַר יְהוָה לְמֹשֶׁה אֲסֹף אֶת־הָעָם וְאֶתְּנָהּ לָהֶם מַיִם:
 "אִזּוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת עָלֶי בְּאֵר עֲגוּלָהּ: "בְּאֵר תַּפְרִיחַ שָׂרִים כְּרוּחַ
 נְדִיבֵי הָעָם בְּמַחֲקֵק בְּמִשְׁעָנָתָם ...

"¹⁶And from there to Be'er, which is the well where Adonai said to Moses, 'Assemble the people that I may give them water.' ¹⁷Then Israel sang this song: Spring up, O well – sing to it – ¹⁸the well which the chieftains dug, which the nobles of the people started with maces, with their own staffs..."

Verses 17-18 is known as the "Song of the Well." It is often associated with Exodus 17:1-7 and Numbers 20:1-12, not only because it is another example of the people receiving water after crying out in thirst, but because the "chieftans" are analogous to Moses, and their "staffs" correspond to his wonder-working stick.¹³³ Each instance adheres to the "water in the wilderness" motif, as each demonstrates a much-needed provision of water from God.

As we know from Genesis, "*Be'er*" literally means "well." It is also the proper name of a place,¹³⁴ presumably because of the presence of wells there. As the text continues, Numbers 21:18-20 mentions two other places with names that have connections to water. It reads:

... וּמִמַּטָּנָה מַטָּנָה: ¹⁹וּמִמַּטָּנָה נַחֲלִיֵּאל וּמִנַּחֲלִיֵּאל בְּמוֹת: ²⁰וּמִבְּמוֹת הַנִּיָּא אֲשֶׁר
 בְּשִׂרָה מוֹאב רֹאשׁ הַפִּסְגָּה וְנִשְׁקָפָה עַל־כָּנִי הַיַּשִּׁמֹן:

"¹⁸... From the wilderness to Mattanah, ¹⁹and from Mattanah to Nahaliel, and from Nahaliel to Bamoth, ²⁰and from Bamoth to the valley that is in the country of Moab, at the peak of Pisgah, overlooking the wasteland."

¹³² See Num. 21:6-9.

¹³³ Propp, *Water in the Wilderness*, 52.

¹³⁴ Milgrom, *JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, 177.

“*Mattanah*” literally means “gift,” which could refer to the gift of water, and “*Nahaliel*” literally means either “stream of God” or “mighty stream.”¹³⁴ Neither one of these places is mentioned elsewhere, suggesting that they may not be actual places, but rather, they are words used to emphasize the richness of the water God provides. However, while “*Bamoth*” is a noun meaning “high places,” it is also the name of a frequently attested place. Formal consistency would suggest that each term is the name of a place; that one could not translate the first two terms as “gift” and “stream of God.” Yet, the fact that these places have multiple meanings is significant.

Perhaps the Song of the Well does not end with verse 18, but rather, it continues through verse 20, and perhaps there is another way to read these verses: as poetic metaphor. I suggest the following alternative to Numbers 21:17-20 (changes are highlighted in blue):

“¹⁷Then Israel sang this song: Spring up, O well – sing to it – ¹⁸the well which the chieftains dug, which the nobles of the people started with maces, with their own staffs. A gift from the wilderness, ¹⁹and a stream of God from this gift. And [because of] a stream of God, [we made it safely] to Bamoth, ²⁰and from Bamoth to the valley that is in the country of Moab, at the peak of Pisgah, overlooking the wasteland.”

These changes suggest a deep understanding and appreciation of water as a gift from God. This version of the Song of the Well expresses the frequent metaphor of water as a life-giving force – a life-giving force that comes from God. As a result of God’s benevolent gift of water, the Israelites are able to continue on their desert journey, are able to safely reach Bamoth and beyond, and ultimately, the Promised Land. Water assures them life, whereas its absence would have brought about death. Immense gratitude for such a gift warrants a song such as this.

¹³⁴ Milgrom, *JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, 178.

ACCESS, AUTHORITY AND ABUNDANCE

From numerous passages in the Torah, it is apparent that access to water is of great importance, as water is critical for survival. The Book of Numbers makes it clear that access to water also indicates a certain element of power and prestige. It is a mark of security to be in possession of a continuing and reliable water supply. For example, in Numbers 20, when the Israelites are in the midst of their wilderness wandering, not only must they ask permission to cross into a foreign land, but they must also swear not to use that land's water without permission and pay. Numbers 20:17-19 reads:

“¹⁷Allow us, then, to cross your country. We will not pass through fields or vineyards, and we will not drink water from wells. We will follow the king's highway, turning off neither to the right nor to the left until we have crossed your territory.’ ¹⁸But Edom answered him, ‘You shall not pass through us, else we will go out against you with the sword.’ ¹⁹‘We will keep to the beaten track,’ the Israelites said to them, ‘and if we or our cattle drink your water, we will pay for it. We ask only for passage on foot—it is but a small matter.’”

This passage (in addition to Numbers 21:22, which is similar) indicates that water is considered controlled property, and control of such property puts one in a position of power.¹³⁶ This also emphasizes the preciousness of water because of its scarcity in the region. Perhaps Edom's rejection of the Israelite request reflects a sense of selfishness or an obsession with power. Or, perhaps it reflects the very limited water supply and the nation's inability to spare any water, regardless of the price visitors would be willing to pay. Thus, it is not necessarily their distance from water, but their lack of *access* to water that leaves the Israelites in a particularly precarious position in the wilderness.

¹³⁶ Such political aspects of water first become apparent in the well disputes of Gen. 21 and 26.

That vulnerability may be real to the Israelites, but it is not always apparent to outsiders. In Numbers 24:5-9, only three chapters later, Balaam marvels at the beauty and perceived strength and stability of the Israelite community. He says:

“⁵How fair are your tents, O Jacob, Your dwellings, O Israel! ⁶Like palm-groves that stretch out, like gardens beside a river, like aloes planted by Adonai, like cedars beside the water; ⁷their boughs drip with moisture, their roots have abundant water. Their king shall rise above Agag, their kingdom shall be exalted. ⁸God who freed them from Egypt Is for them like the horns of the wild ox. They shall devour enemy nations, crush their bones, and smash their arrows. ⁹They crouch, they lie down like a lion, like the king of beasts; who dare rouse them? Blessed are they who bless you, accursed they who curse you!”

Here, water serves as a central metaphor for prosperity, abundance, and vitality. Allusions to Genesis contribute to the depth of this metaphor. For example, the “gardens beside a river” in verse 6 resembles the river that issues from the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2:10. The image of trees so drenched that their boughs drip with water presents an image of vegetation that will be watered from both above and below, resembling Genesis 49:25.¹³⁷ Not only does the abundance of water suggest great prosperity, but, as discussed in the Genesis section, the imagery in Genesis 49:25 evokes the promise of fertility. In much the same way, the water imagery in Numbers 24:6-7 also suggests that, like well-watered trees, the Israelites will be a fertile people. These words come from the mouth of Balaam, but God inspires them, as verse 2 says, “the spirit of God came upon him.” This is an oracle expressing God’s plans for Israel, plans that involve great promise, using water as its most telling example.

¹³⁷ Milgrom, *JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, 204.

IDEAL PERIMETERS AND PATHWAYS

Much like several bodies of water in Genesis, the water mentioned in Exodus 23:31 forms important geographic boundaries. The verse reads: "I will set your borders from the *Yam Suf* to the Sea of Philistia, and from the wilderness to the River; for I will deliver the inhabitants of the land into your hands, and you will drive them out before you." According to Sarna, the "*Yam Suf*" here refers to the Gulf of Aqaba of the Red Sea, the "Sea of Philistia" refers to the Mediterranean Sea, and the "River" refers to the Euphrates.¹³⁸ These apparently form the ideal boundaries of the land. As Sarna notes: "At no time in Israelite history, even at the height of the Davidic-Solomonic empire, were these boundaries a reality."¹³⁹ Yet, the use of water to describe such ideal boundaries implies that, like water, the promise of land is enduring, life-affirming, and demonstrative of God's presence.

A different set of ideal boundaries appears in Numbers 34. This chapter flows logically from Numbers 33:50-56, because, having been commanded to displace and replace the present occupants of the land, it becomes imperative for the Israelites to know the land's boundaries.¹⁴⁰ Numbers 34:1-12 reads:

"¹Adonai spoke to Moses, saying: ²Instruct the Israelite people and say to them: 'When you enter the land of Canaan, this is the land that shall fall to you as your portion, the land of Canaan with its various boundaries: ³Your southern sector shall extend from the wilderness of Zin alongside Edom. Your southern boundary shall start on the east from the tip of the Dead Sea [יַם־הַמֶּלַח]. ⁴Your boundary shall then turn to pass south of the ascent of Akrabbim and continue to Zin, and its limits shall be south of Kadesh-barnea, reaching Hazar-addar and continuing to Azmon. ⁵From Azmon the boundary shall turn toward the Wadi of Egypt and terminate at the Sea [יָם־הַיָּם]. ⁶For the western boundary you shall have the coast of the Great Sea [הַיָּם הַגָּדוֹל]; that shall serve as your western boundary. ⁷This shall be your northern boundary: Draw a line from the Great Sea [הַיָּם הַגָּדוֹל] to Mount Hor; ⁸from Mount Hor draw a line to Lebo-hamath, and let the boundary reach Zedad. ⁹The boundary

¹³⁸ Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, 149.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ Milgrom, *JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, 285.

shall then run to Ziphron and terminate at Hazar-enan. That shall be your northern boundary. ¹⁰For your eastern boundary you shall draw a line from Hazar-enan to Shepham. ¹¹From Shepham the boundary shall descend to Riblah on the east side of Ain; from there the boundary shall continue downward and abut on the eastern slopes of the Sea of Kinneret [יָם־כִּנְרֶת]. ¹²The boundary shall then descend along the Jordan [הַיַּרְדֵּן] and terminate at the Dead Sea [יָם־הַמֶּלַח]. That shall be your land as defined by its boundaries on all sides.”

Every boundary of the land, on all four directional sides, is defined in some way by water.

The southern border runs from the “יָם־הַמֶּלַח,” the Dead Sea, to the “יָם־הַיָּבֵשׁ,” or “Sea,” which is the Mediterranean.¹⁴¹ The “יָם־הַגָּדוֹל,” or “Great Sea,” also refers to the Mediterranean,¹⁴² and forms the western boundary of the land. That body of water is a point of reference for the northern boundary, and the eastern boundary is punctuated by the “יָם־כִּנְרֶת,” the Sea of Kinneret, “הַיַּרְדֵּן,” the Jordan River, and the “יָם־הַמֶּלַח,” the Dead Sea. Like the boundaries outlined in Exodus 23:31, these borders are idealized and do not correspond to Israel’s territory at any time in its history.¹⁴³

As we know, water forms not only geographic boundaries (real or otherwise), it also functions as a point of reference. In the midst of desert wanderings, such points of reference are particularly important. For example, when treading unfamiliar territory, it would be important to know where the inhabitants of that territory live. Numbers 13:29 reads: “Amalekites dwell in the Negev region; Hittites, Jebusites, and Amorites inhabit the hill country; and Canaanites dwell by the Sea and along the Jordan.” According to Milgrom, each of these regions corresponds to “the four major geographical divisions of the promised land: the southern wilderness, the central mountain chain above it from Beer-Sheva

¹⁴¹ Milgrom, *JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, 286.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 284.

northward and the plains on either side, the sea coast, and the Jordan.”¹⁴⁴ Among these regions and peoples, water marks the dwelling place of the Canaanites.

As an easily identifiable landmark, water also helps to identify the proper path that the Israelites should take, as Numbers 14:25 reads: “... Start out, then, tomorrow and march into the wilderness by way of the *Yam Suf*.” The fact that “*Yam Suf*” is used – the same name for the sea that Israel crossed in leaving Egypt – reminds the Israelites from where they came, and impresses upon them that they have no choice but to follow God’s instructions. As Milgrom writes, “if Israel desires to return to Egypt (v. 4), then it should turn back – but only to die in the wilderness (v. 28-29).”¹⁴⁵ Therefore, this water not only serves as a guide for a particular route in the wilderness, but it also serves a symbolic purpose, to urge the Israelites to choose the path of life, involving loyalty to God, over the path of death, involving betrayal.

The landmarks that bodies of water provide may guide the Israelites on the path they are to follow, but they also serve to mark significant events from their collective past. Numbers 33 utilizes water references to recall the wilderness itinerary of the Israelites. For example, verses 8-14 read:

“⁸They set out from Pene-hahiroth and passed through the sea into the wilderness; and they made a three-days’ journey in the wilderness of Etham and encamped at Marah. ⁹They set out from Marah and came to Elim. There were twelve springs in Elim and seventy palm trees, so they encamped there. ¹⁰They set out from Elim and encamped by the *Yam Suf*. ¹¹They set out from the *Yam Suf* and encamped in the wilderness of Sin. ¹²They set out from the wilderness of Sin and encamped at Dophkah. ¹³They set out from Dophkah and encamped at Alush. ¹⁴They set out from Alush and encamped at Rephidim; it was there that the people had no water to drink.

¹⁴⁴ Milgrom, *JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, 106.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 113.

The names of these places look familiar, because they have appeared before. Compiling all of these events together helps to describe the overall journey of the Israelites, without recalling all of the specifics of the experiences along the way. Some details are included for particular reasons.

For example, the mention of the *Yam Suf* – which Milgrom says refers specifically to the Red Sea here – indicates that the journey pointed southward.¹⁴⁶ The inclusion of the twelve springs and seventy palm trees at Elim is typical of ancient Near Eastern military itineraries, as it gives an account of the peoples' sources of water and food.¹⁴⁷ Yet, the inclusion of the details of Elim, following the mention of Marah, may also serve another purpose. They assure that the reader remembers the miraculous appearance of sweet water at Marah, and the abundance of water at Elim, both of which were the product of God's benevolence. "Rephidim" in verse 14 functions in a similar way, as it recalls the episode of Massah-Meribah in Exodus 17:1-7, where God caused water to flow from the rock to assuage the thirst of the people. These references not only outline the path of the Israelite journey, but also indicate that God is present with them at every stage.

POTION OF PUNISHMENT

The water that appears as part of the dramatic "golden calf" scene in Exodus 32 differs from other functions of water in the wilderness narrative. Exodus 32:19-20 reads:

"¹⁹As soon as Moses came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, he became enraged; and he hurled the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain. ²⁰He took the calf that they had made and burned it; he ground it to powder and strewed it upon the water and so made the Israelites drink it."

¹⁴⁶ Milgrom, *JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, 279.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

When looking at these verses alone, it is unclear as to what "water" the text is referring. However, when looking at these verses in conjunction with Deuteronomy 9:21, which recaps the incident, it becomes clear. Deuteronomy 9:21 reads: "As for that sinful thing you had made, the calf, I took it and put it to the fire; I broke it to bits and ground it thoroughly until it was fine as dust, and I threw its dust into the brook that comes down from the mountain." This verse indicates that the "water" in Exodus 32:20 is a local mountain stream. Sarna suggests that, "this implies a single source of water for the entire camp, the idea being, apparently, that no individual could escape drinking the mixture."¹⁴⁸

This is a fragmentary hint of the use of water in forms of trial by ordeal. Water is used explicitly in such a way in Numbers 5:11-28, which I will discuss later at greater length. The difference between the two scenes is that water in Numbers 5 is used to reveal or exonerate the sin of adultery, whereas water in Exodus 32 is used to punish the sin of idolatry. This punishment ritual is, perhaps, an example of symbolic spiritual restoration. We have seen the ways in which a covenant with God sustains the Israelite people. We can infer, therefore, that an abandonment of that covenant threatens their survival. Idolatrous acts such as the creation of the golden calf jeopardize the future of the Jewish people because they jeopardize the covenantal relationship with God. Therefore, the effect of drinking Moses' mixture emphasizes, once again, the life-giving powers of water. As a purifying life-affirming agent, water in this episode correlates with the waters used for priestly ritual elsewhere in the Torah. The following chapter will explore the ways in which ritual water also purifies and restores life, on both the concrete and metaphoric levels.

¹⁴⁸ Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, 207.

CHAPTER FOUR

SACRED SUBSTANCE: WATER IN PRIESTLY RITUAL

“If there is magic on the planet, it is contained in the water.”

- Loren Eiseley

PRIESTLY PURIFICATION

Throughout various sections of Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, and much of the Book of Leviticus, water is used as a cleansing agent, primarily for the purposes of ritual purification. Unlike, for example, the waters of the Flood in Genesis or the parting of the *Yam Suf* in Exodus, the water used in priestly¹⁴⁹ ritual is not a miraculous force that defies the laws of nature. Rather, it contains the inherent power to cleanse, purify and change.

This purification plays a particularly important role in animal sacrifice. Exodus 29:17-18 is the first example of water being used to purify animals in preparation for sacred offerings. The verses read: “Cut up the ram into sections, wash its entrails and legs, and put them with its quarters and its head. Turn the whole ram into smoke upon the altar. It is a burnt offering to Adonai, a pleasing odor, an offering by fire to Adonai.” Similar language is used in Leviticus 9:14, which reads: “He washed the entrails and the legs, and turned them into smoke on the altar with the burnt offering.” Water is not mentioned explicitly in these verses. Yet, it can be inferred that water is being used, because water is mentioned as the agent for washing animals in Leviticus 1:9, 1:13, and 8:21, all of which state that, “the entrails and legs shall be washed with water.”

Water serves two purposes in ritual sacrifice. First, it acts to cleanse the animals by removing the blood. Second, it functions as a “spiritual” purifier. Water is the medium that prepares an animal to be offered up to God. Presumably, without that water, a sacrifice

¹⁴⁹ I am aware of the fact that scholars debate what is and is not considered “priestly” material. I am using the term loosely throughout this thesis.

would be unacceptable and unsuitable for God. Prior to being cleansed, an animal is simply a carcass, whereas after being washed, it is ready to become a holy offering. Water, therefore, carries with it a certain element of holiness, as well as the power to transform. Perhaps, in this way, the water used for preparation of animal sacrifices could be considered an important boundary, much like the Jabbok in Genesis 32, or the *Yam Suf* in Exodus 14-15. In each case, water is a boundary marking spiritual transformation.

Just as water plays a part in preparing animals for sacrifice, water also plays an important role in preparing the priests to perform their sacrificial duties. Several verses describe the requirement of the priests to wash themselves with water, beginning with Exodus 29:4, which reads: "Lead Aaron and his sons up to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and wash them with water." Leviticus 8:6 echoes this verse, as it states: "Then Moses brought Aaron and his sons forward and washed them with water." According to Sarna, because Aaron and his sons are donning the sacred garments of office for the first time, they must immerse their entire bodies in water, whereas the regular daily service only requires that they wash their hands and feet.¹⁵⁰ This is evident in Exodus 30:17-21, which reads:

"¹⁷Adonai spoke to Moses, saying: ¹⁸Make a laver of copper and a stand of copper for it, for washing; and place it between the Tent of Meeting and the altar. Put water in it, ¹⁹and let Aaron and his sons wash their hands and feet in water drawn from it. ²⁰When they enter the Tent of Meeting they shall wash with water, that they may not die; or when they approach the altar to serve, to turn into smoke an offering by fire to Adonai, ²¹they shall wash their hands and feet, that they may not die. It shall be a law for all time for them – for him and his offspring – throughout the ages.

For the regular rituals at the altar, the priests must purify themselves by washing their hands and feet in water. The copper laver is not mentioned in Exodus 29:4, because the installation

¹⁵⁰ Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, 187.

ceremony of the priests mandated full-body immersion, which would not have called for a laver. There is a repetition of the description of both the installation and daily purification rituals in Exodus 40:7, 40:12, and 40:30-32, as well as Leviticus 16:4 and 16:24. All of these verses are similar in that they utilize water as the means of ritual purification and readiness for sacred service.

Levine states: "Beyond the obvious hygienic advantages of water, its utilization in ritual also serves to purify symbolically."¹⁵¹ This purification is not only about preparing the priests for sacrificial rituals, but it serves as a method of life-preservation, as well. Exodus 30:20-21 repeat the phrase "that he may not die" as a rationale for washing with water. This suggests that the nature of the priestly service was somehow dangerous. Mary Douglas argues that holiness carries with it a certain element of danger, as she writes: "...The impure person not correctly prepared for contact with the holy will be killed."¹⁵² Therefore, water is particularly important for the priests because it functions as a life-agent that could protect them against such danger.

Sarna, however, claims that the phrase "that he may not die" is a formula that emphasizes the importance of following the prescribed rules. He writes:

"Any deviation from the prescribed rules places the priest in the category of an unauthorized person and invalidates his service. He is thus an encroacher... in the sacred precincts. The formula expresses the severity with which such an offense is viewed."¹⁵³

Whether it is used for the preservation of physical life or the preservation of ritual tradition, it is clear that washing with water is an indispensable practice. Here, the life-giving power of water is manifest on both the physical and symbolic levels.

¹⁵¹ Levine, 50.

¹⁵² Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 146.

¹⁵³ Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, 183.

COMMANDMENTS OF CLASSIFICATION

The purpose of water extends beyond preparation for sacrificial ritual. Water is also used to classify animals as acceptable or unacceptable for consumption. For example, Leviticus 11:9 states: "These you may eat of all that live in water: anything in water, whether in the seas or in the streams, that has fins and scales – these you may eat."¹⁵⁴ However, water does not render everything pure. Not all creatures that live in water are acceptable, as Leviticus 11:10 states: "anything in the seas or in the streams that has no fins and scales, among all the swarming things of the water and among all the other living creatures that are in the water – they are an abomination for you." Because both types of creatures – those with fins and scales and those without – live in the water, water cannot distinguish one from the other. It is not the water that determines whether these animals are pure or impure. Rather, water serves simply as a means of classification for both.

It is also possible that water is used here to convey the immense quantity of marine life to consider. Leviticus 11:46 reads: "These are the instructions concerning animals, birds, all living creatures that move in water, and all creatures that swarm on earth." Just as *yam* in Genesis often conveys immensity, vastness, or a sense of complete inclusiveness, the laws in Leviticus 11 pertain to "all living creatures that move in water." *Mayim* indicates that these laws are thorough; that the totality of marine life is involved.

¹⁵⁴ Deut. 14:9 repeats this law, virtually verbatim.

CONDUCTION OF CONTAMINATION

While water is not the cause of impurity for finless marine life, it can be the source of contamination for certain objects, rendering them "impure." For example, Leviticus 11:34 states that any food "shall become unclean if it came in contact with water." Similarly, Leviticus 11:38 states that, "if water is put on the seed and any part of a carcass falls upon it, it shall be unclean for you." In these verses, it is clear that water is a transmitter of impurity. Levine claims that, in the case of the seed, "water conditions seed, rendering it susceptible to impurity."¹⁵⁵

As for the carcass or corpse mentioned, contamination through contact with such is among the most severe forms of contamination. That is, of course, when the carcass is not slaughtered for the purposes of ritual sacrifice and handled by a priest accordingly. We must also note the contrast between washing a carcass with water in preparation for sacrifice in Exodus 29 and earlier chapters of Leviticus, and accidental contact between a carcass and water here.

Apparently, the location or source of the water in question is also a factor in the transmission of purity or impurity. Leviticus 11:36 states: "A spring or cistern in which water is collected shall be clean, but whoever touches such a carcass in it shall be unclean." It is useful to define these water receptacles. A מִקְוֵה is a natural spring, and a בּוֹר is a technical term for a cistern in which rainwater is collected from the surrounding area. The term מִקְוֵה הַמַּיִם also designates a natural body of water, as is evident from Genesis 1:10: 'And the gathering of waters [*mikveh ha-mayim*] [God] called seas.' Thus, it becomes clear

¹⁵⁵ Levine, 71.

that natural bodies of water, in contrast to manufactured vessels, are not transmitters of impurity. As Levine explains:

“Whereas water generally renders foodstuffs susceptible to impurity, this is true only of water “placed in them,” that is, water emitting from a vessel that is detached from the earth. By contrast, neither rainwater in a cistern nor natural bodies of water transmit impurity.”¹⁵⁶

Therefore, the carcass itself may be unclean and untouchable, but the cistern and the water in it remain “clean.” While modern approaches to such situations would recognize the safety features of these regulations, the Torah places them in the religious and cultic realm.

LIFE-GIVING LIQUID

While water transmits impurity to some objects, elsewhere it is also a means of purifying objects that have become contaminated. As Milgrom notes: “Water embodies an anomalous, indeed, paradoxical status. It is the purifying agent par excellence... yet it is most vulnerable to impurity.”¹⁵⁷ Its power to purify objects is apparent in Leviticus 11:32, which refers to objects touched by swarming creatures that are considered “unclean.” It reads: “And anything on which one of them falls when dead shall be unclean: be it any article of wood, or a cloth, or a skin, or a sack – any such article that can be put to use shall be dipped in water, and it shall remain unclean until evening; then it shall be clean.” As mentioned above, carcasses are considered severely contaminated. However, water apparently has the power to cleanse objects that come into contact with such unclean bodies, making the objects pure enough to use again.

¹⁵⁶ Levine, 71.

¹⁵⁷ Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics*, 119.

Water has the capability to purify people, as well as objects that have become נִטְמָא –

“impure.” For example, Leviticus 16:26-28 reads:

“²⁶He who set the Azazel-goat free shall wash his clothes and bathe his body in water; after that he may re-enter the camp. ²⁷The bull of sin offering and the goat of sin offering whose blood was brought in to purge the Shrine shall be taken outside the camp; and their hides, flesh, and dung shall be consumed in fire. ²⁸He who burned them shall wash his clothes and bathe his body in water; after that he may re-enter the camp.”

The person who has become contaminated is the one who handles the Azazel-goat, the scapegoat upon which the sins of the community have been symbolically transmitted, and which carries those sins away into the wilderness. As Levine explains, “by laying his hands on the scapegoat, the High Priest transferred to it the sins of the people, which were carried with it into the wilderness, to a land of no return.”¹⁵⁸ Because the scapegoat became impure, “anyone having contact with such required purification.”¹⁵⁹

Water also has the power to purify people from other types of defilement. For example, not only is it considered a sin to eat an animal that has been found dead, but doing so renders a person impure. Leviticus 17:15-16 reads:

“Any person, whether citizen or stranger, who eats what has died or has been torn by beasts shall wash his clothes, bathe in water, and remain unclean until evening; then he shall be clean. But if he does not wash his clothes and bathe his body, he shall bear his guilt.”

Water alone is the vehicle through which an individual can expiate his or her sin and restore his or her status as a “clean” person. Other sins of defilement are treated in a similar way.

As Leviticus 22:5-6 reads:

“If a man touches any swarming thing by which he is made unclean or any human being by whom he is made unclean – whatever his uncleanness – the person who

¹⁵⁸ Levine, 106.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 107.

touches such shall be unclean until evening and shall not eat of the sacred donations unless he has washed his body in water."

These verses make it clear that water has a unique restorative power. Assuming a state of "uncleanliness" may not threaten the physical life of the tainted individual, but it certainly impacts his or her status in the community and the rituals that the person is permitted to perform. Thus, water acts once again as a symbolic life-giving agent, enabling an individual to resume full participation in communal life.

Perhaps the most dramatic demonstration of water's capacity to restore life to an "impure" individual appears in Chapter 14 of Leviticus. The text introduces a *מְצוֹרָה*, a person afflicted with a scaly skin disease resembling leprosy. This disease, *tzara'at*, is often considered one of the most disgraceful conditions that a member of the ancient Israelite community could experience. Because it requires that the *metzora* be temporarily excluded from the community, and it is necessary for the person to participate in a detailed purification ritual in order to rejoin the community, *tzara'at* is often associated with exile, and with shame. However, a closer look at the text reveals a deep concern for the *metzora* and the process of his or her recovery. Inter-textual comparison demonstrates that the condition of *tzara'at* is associated with death, and therefore, returning the *metzora* to the community could be viewed as a restoration to life. Such a process demands a great sense of responsibility and sensitivity. And a dramatic transformation of both status and spirit also demands the use of a powerful change-agent. Water serves this function.

In order to appreciate the live-giving powers of water (represented by both *מַיִם* and *מַיִם חַיִּים* in Leviticus 14), it is important to first understand the connection between *tzara'at* and death. To start, there is an undeniable parallel between the purification ritual for the

metzora, and the purification ritual for one who comes in contact with a corpse, found in

Numbers 19:1-13. See Figure 1 for a textual comparison:

Figure 1:

<p>CLEANSING AFTER TZARA'AT Leviticus 14:1-11</p>	<p>CLEANSING AFTER CORPSE CONTACT Numbers 19:1-13</p>
<p>¹Adonai spoke to Moses, saying: ²This shall be the ritual for a leper at the time that he is to be cleansed. When it has been reported to the priest, ³the priest shall go outside the camp. If the priest sees that the leper has been healed of his scaly affection,</p> <p>⁵The priest shall order one of the birds slaughtered over living water in an earthen vessel; ⁶and he shall take the live bird, along with the cedar wood, the crimson stuff, and the hyssop, and dip them together with the live bird in the blood of the bird that was slaughtered over the living water. ⁷He shall then sprinkle it seven times on him who is to be cleansed of the eruption and cleanse him; and he shall set the live bird free in the open country. ⁸The one to be cleansed shall wash his clothes, shave off all his hair, and bathe in water; then he shall be clean. After that he may enter the camp, but he must remain outside his tent seven days. ⁹On the seventh day he shall shave off all his hair -- of head, beard, and eyebrows. When he has shaved off all his hair, he shall wash his clothes and bathe his body in water; then he shall be clean. ¹⁰On the eighth day he shall take two male lambs without blemish, one ewe lamb in its first year without blemish, three-tenths of a measure of choice flour with oil mixed in for a meal offering, and one log of oil. ¹¹These shall be presented before Adonai, with the man to be cleansed, at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, by the priest who performs the cleansing.</p>	<p>¹Adonai spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: ²This is the ritual law that Adonai has commanded: Instruct the Israelite people to bring you a red cow without blemish, in which there is no defect and on which no yoke has been laid. ³You shall give it to Eleazar the priest. It shall be taken outside the camp and slaughtered in his presence. ⁴Eleazar the priest shall take some of its blood with his finger and sprinkle it seven times toward the front of the Tent of Meeting. ⁵The cow shall be burned in his sight -- its hide, flesh, and blood shall be burned, its dung included --</p> <p>⁷The priest shall wash his garments and bathe his body in water; after that the priest may reenter the camp, but he shall be unclean until evening. ⁸He who performed the burning shall also wash his garments in water, bathe his body in water, and be unclean until evening. ⁹A man who is clean shall gather up the ashes of the cow and deposit them outside the camp in a clean place, to be kept for water of lustration for the Israelite community. It is for cleansing. ¹⁰He who gathers up the ashes of the cow shall also wash his clothes¹⁵⁹ and be unclean until evening. This shall be a permanent law for the Israelites and for the strangers who reside among you. ¹¹He who touches the corpse of any human being shall be unclean for seven days. ¹²He shall cleanse himself with it on the third day and on the seventh day, and then be clean; if he fails to cleanse himself on the third and seventh days, he shall not be clean. ¹³Whoever touches a corpse, the body of a person who has died, and does not cleanse himself, defiles Adonai's Tabernacle; that person shall be cut off from Israel. Since the water of lustration was not dashed on him, he remains unclean; his uncleanness is still upon him.</p>

¹⁵⁹ It is understood that he will also bathe his body. [Milgrom, *JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, 161.]

As the chart above reveals, both rituals involve taking something or someone outside the camp, both involve the use of a concoction of "cedar wood, hyssop, and crimson stuff," both involve washing the clothing and body of the afflicted in water several times, and both demand that the afflicted individual extend his liminal status to seven days. These similarities enable one to see a clear connection between the *metzora* and a corpse. This parallel is made even more explicit in Numbers 12:10-12, which describes Miriam's sudden affliction of *tzara'at*. The text reads:

"As the cloud withdrew from the Tent, there was Miriam stricken with snow-white scales! When Aaron turned toward Miriam, he saw that she was stricken with scales. And Aaron said to Moses, "O my lord, account not to us the sin which we committed in our folly. **Let her not be as one dead**, who emerges from his mother's womb with half his flesh eaten away."

If the *metzora* is one who is "as one dead," the purification ritual enabling his recovery must transform him into one who is "as one alive."

The mixture of "cedar wood, hyssop, and crimson stuff," in addition to the water used in these rituals, is significant, as well. In Exodus 12:22, Israelites are ordered to dip hyssop into blood to smear on their doorposts. Adriane Leveen notes that this therefore associates hyssop "with the life-saving dimension of blood."¹⁶¹ The crimson stuff is used in Exodus 36:8, 35, and 37 as part of the material in the Tabernacle, and in Exodus 39:1-2 as part of the sacred vestments and ephod of the high priest. These materials are already connected with the saving of life, and their additional associations with a sacred site and a religious leader mark them as powerful and efficacious.¹⁶² These associations undoubtedly play a role in the life-affirming transformation effected by the *metzora's* ritual purification.

¹⁶¹ Adriane Leveen, "Parashat Chukat," *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrew L. Weiss (URJ Press, 2007).

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

The "cedar wood, hyssop, and crimson stuff" may be significant, but they are neither as powerful nor as central as water in this ritual. Elsewhere, the Tanakh makes it clear that water alone is the source of such purification and restorative healing. 2 Kings 5 describes a case of one afflicted with *tzara'at*. Verse 10 reads: "Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, 'Go and bathe seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean [טָהָר].'" And 2 Kings 5:14 continues: "So he went down and immersed himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had bidden; and his flesh became like a little boy's, and he was clean [טָהָר]."

However, it is important to note that in Leviticus, the purpose of the purification ritual is not to heal the *metzora* of his affliction. Leviticus 14:3 indicates that the *metzora* has already been healed prior to this ritual, as it reads: "If the priest sees that the *metzora* has been healed of his scaly affection..." Thus, purification in this sense involves something more than physical restoration; it involves spiritual restoration, as well. For this task, water also plays a critical role.

Mayim chayim, translated as "living waters" and referring to a source of continually flowing water, is required for two other purification rituals in the Bible.¹⁶³ In Leviticus 15:13, the ritual for cleansing after genital discharges calls for the use of *mayim chayim*, and in Numbers 19:17, the ritual for cleansing after contaminating contact with a corpse, as described above, calls for the use of *mayim chayim*. In both cases, like the purification ritual for the *metzora* in Leviticus 14, *mayim chayim* is used *after* the healing and bodily cleansing of the affected individual has occurred. This suggests that the use of "*chayim*" does not refer to physical life. On the contrary, *mayim chayim* is used to produce a life-affirming spiritual

¹⁶³ The term also appears in Gen. 26, in reference to water that Isaac discovers when searching for wells. For Isaac, *mayim chayim* is not associated with ritual, but it *is* associated with personal transformation.

transformation. In the case of the *metzora*, it is a transformation that brings the afflicted individual back to life as a member of the Israelite community.

Because ancient Israelite society placed such a high value on community, one's survival depended on communal attachments. Having been ostracized from the camp as a result of this disease, it is as if the *metzora* has lost his or her life. Physically, the *metzora* is still alive, but without a community, his or her spirit is dead. Therefore, the water becomes an important vehicle for cleansing and rejuvenating the person's mind and heart, in preparation for returning to the community, and thus, to life.

How does water accomplish such a task? The purification ritual for a *metzora* is described in detail in Leviticus 14:1-11 (see Figure 1 above). At first glance, water may not appear to play a greater role than any other ritual component. However, deeper exploration will reveal that the *metzora*'s return to life in the Israelite community could not be accomplished without the unique function of this sacred substance.

We have already established the connection between *tzara'at* and death. Thus, it follows logically that in this ritual, the *metzora* is closely linked to a dead bird. The blood of the slain bird absorbs the disease from the *metzora* and transfers it to water (*mayim chayim*). A live bird then reabsorbs the disease when it is dipped into the blood, and then the live bird transports the disease into the open country, away from the *metzora*. The *metzora* then dips himself or herself in water (*mayim*), making him or her clean. Figure 2 below illustrates this symbolic transition from death to life:

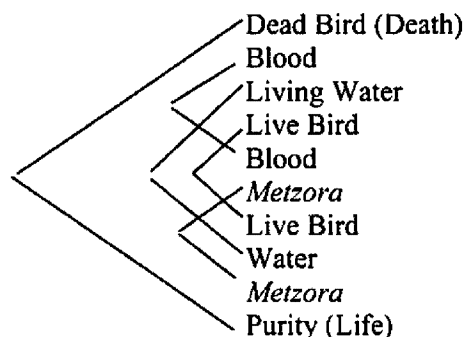
Figure 2:

Disease (death) → *Metzora* → Dead bird → Live bird → *Metzora* → Purification (life)

In this ritual process, water becomes the critical tool, the vehicle for transferring the disease from the *metzora* and restoring the *metzora* to a state of purity.

Without the purifying power of water, this transfer would not be possible. It is the water that impacts the nature of the other sacred life-force liquid in this ritual, namely, blood.¹⁶⁴ The first blood used is the blood of the dead bird, representing death. However, once the blood comes into contact with the *mayim chayim*, it becomes life-giving blood that is then sprinkled on the *metzora*. The live bird affirms its new life by flying away, and the *metzora* affirms a new life by immersing himself or herself again in purifying waters (*mayim*). This is further illustrated in the diagram below:

Figure 3:



The symmetrical structure of this ritual and the symbolic power of each of its components suggest that it was carefully crafted to mark the transition from death to life.

Water, therefore, is the nexus between death and life. This is evidenced further by other ritual parallels beyond the similarities between the *metzora* and the ritual for

¹⁶⁴ Connections between water and blood also appear in Deut. 12:16, 12:24 and 15:23, where the blood of slaughtered animals is "[poured] out on the ground like water." These verses also highlight the connections between blood, water, and life, since the loss of blood equals the loss of life (and water = life). In Deuteronomy, however, while both liquids are mentioned in association with a ritual practice, water itself is not present. The image of water is merely used to illuminate the image of blood. The ritual relationship between blood and water deserves further exploration, but is beyond the scope of this thesis.

purification after corpse contact. Leviticus 14:49-53 describes a ritual that involves cleansing a house that appears to have been infected with *tzara'at*. This purification ritual utilizes both *mayim* and *mayim chayim*, and is almost identical to the ritual in Leviticus 14:1-11. Perhaps this parallel hints at the importance of protecting boundaries between the self and the outside world. The breaching of one's skin and the breaching of the walls of a house may compare to the breaching of community solidarity and tradition. Just as the *metzora's* exclusion from the community signifies social and spiritual death, this kind of breach may signify the death of communal identity.

Leviticus 15:1-18 and Leviticus 15:19-30, which involve cleansing after experiencing genital emissions, also contain elements in common with the ritual for purifying the *metzora*. To see the parallels between all of these rituals, see Figure 4 on the following page and note the color comparisons:

Figure 4 (Textual similarities are marked by matching colors):

<p>Leviticus 14:2-11</p>	<p>²This shall be the ritual for a leper at the time that he is to be cleansed. When it has been reported to the priest, ³the priest shall go outside the camp. If the priest sees that the leper has been healed of his scaly affection, ⁴the priest shall order one of the birds slaughtered over living water in an earthen vessel; and he shall take the live bird, along with the cedar wood, the crimson stuff, and the hyssop, and dip them together with the live bird in the blood of the bird that was slaughtered over the living water. ⁵He shall then sprinkle it seven times on him who is to be cleansed of the eruption and cleanse him; and he shall set the live bird free in the open country. ⁶The one to be cleansed shall wash his clothes, and bathe in water; then he shall be clean. After that he may enter the camp, but he must remain outside his tent seven days. ⁷On the seventh day he shall shave off all his hair -- of head, beard, and eyebrows. When he has shaved off all his hair, he shall wash his clothes and bathe his body in water; then he shall be clean. ⁸On the eighth day he shall take two male lambs without blemish, one ewe lamb in its first year without blemish, three-tenths of a measure of choice flour with oil mixed in for a meal offering, and one log of oil. ⁹These shall be presented before Adonai, with the man to be cleansed, at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, by the priest who performs the cleansing.</p>
<p>Leviticus 14:49-53</p>	<p>¹⁰To purge the house, ¹¹he shall slaughter the one bird over living water in an earthen vessel. ¹²He shall take the cedar wood, the hyssop, the crimson stuff, and the live bird, and dip them in the blood of the slaughtered bird and the living water, and sprinkle on the house seven times. ¹³Having purged the house with the blood of the bird, the living water, the live bird, the cedar wood, the hyssop, and the crimson stuff, ¹⁴he shall set the live bird free outside the city in the open country. Thus he shall make expiation for the house, and it shall be clean.</p>
<p>Leviticus 15:5-18</p>	<p>⁵Anyone who touches his bedding shall wash his clothes, bathe in water, and remain unclean until evening. ⁶Whoever sits on an object on which the one with the discharge has sat shall wash his clothes, bathe in water, and remain unclean until evening. ⁷Whoever touches the body of the one with the discharge shall wash his clothes, bathe in water, and remain unclean until evening. ⁸If one with a discharge spits on one who is clean, the latter shall wash his clothes, bathe in water, and remain unclean until evening. ⁹Any means for riding that one with a discharge has mounted shall be unclean; ¹⁰whoever touches anything that was under him shall be unclean until evening; and whoever carries such things shall wash his clothes, bathe in water, and remain unclean until evening. ¹¹If one with a discharge, without having rinsed his hands in water, touches another person, that person shall wash his clothes, bathe in water, and remain unclean until evening. ¹²An earthen vessel that one with a discharge touches shall be broken; and any wooden implement shall be rinsed with water. ¹³When one with a discharge becomes clean of his discharge, he shall count off seven days for his cleansing, wash his clothes, and bathe his body in living water; then he shall be clean. ¹⁴On the eighth day he shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons and come before Adonai at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting and give them to the priest. ¹⁵The priest shall offer them, the one as a sin offering and the other as a burnt offering. Thus the priest shall make expiation on his behalf, for his discharge, before Adonai. ¹⁶When a man has an emission of semen, he shall bathe his whole body in water and remain unclean until evening. ¹⁷All cloth or leather on which semen falls shall be washed in water and remain unclean until evening. ¹⁸And if a man has carnal relations with a woman, they shall bathe in water and remain unclean until evening.</p>
<p>Leviticus 15:21-30</p>	<p>²¹Anyone who touches her bedding shall wash his clothes, bathe in water, and remain unclean until evening; ²²and anyone who touches any object on which she has sat shall wash his clothes, bathe in water, and remain unclean until evening. ²³Be it the bedding or be it the object on which she has sat, on touching it he shall be unclean until evening. ²⁴And if a man lies with her, her impurity is communicated to him; he shall be unclean seven days, and any bedding on which he lies shall become unclean. ²⁵When a woman has had a discharge of blood for many days, not at the time of her impurity, or when she has a discharge beyond her period of impurity, she shall be unclean, as though at the time of her impurity, as long as her discharge lasts. ²⁶Any bedding on which she lies while her discharge lasts shall be for her like bedding during her impurity; and any object on which she sits shall become unclean, as it does during her impurity. ²⁷Whoever touches them shall be unclean; he shall wash his clothes, bathe in water, and remain unclean until evening. ²⁸When she becomes clean of her discharge, she shall count off seven days, and after that she shall be clean. ²⁹On the eighth day she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons, and bring them to the priest at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. ³⁰The priest shall offer the one as a sin offering and the other as a burnt offering; and the priest shall make expiation on her behalf, for her unclean discharge, before Adonai.</p>
<p>Numbers 19:2-13</p>	<p>²This is the ritual law that Adonai has commanded: Instruct the Israelite people to bring you a red cow without blemish, in which there is no defect and on which no yoke has been laid. ³You shall give it to Eleazar the priest. It shall be taken outside the camp and slaughtered in his presence. ⁴Eleazar the priest shall take some of its blood with his finger and sprinkle it seven times toward the front of the Tent of Meeting. ⁵The cow shall be burned in his sight -- its hide, flesh, and blood shall be burned, its dung included -- ⁶until evening. ⁷He who performed the burning shall also wash his garments in water, bathe his body in water, and be unclean until evening. ⁸A man who is clean shall gather up the ashes of the cow and deposit them outside the camp in a clean place, to be kept for water of lustration¹ for the Israelite community. It is for cleansing. ⁹He who gathers up the ashes of the cow shall also wash his clothes² and be unclean until evening. This shall be a permanent law for the Israelites and for the strangers who reside among you. ¹⁰He who touches the corpse of any human being shall be unclean for seven days. ¹¹He shall cleanse himself with it on the third day and on the seventh day, and then be clean; if he fails to cleanse himself on the third and seventh days, he shall not be clean. ¹²Whoever touches a corpse, the body of a person who has died, and does not cleanse himself, defiles Adonai's tabernacle; that person shall be cut off from Israel. Since the water of lustration was not dashed on him, he remains unclean; his uncleanness is still upon him.</p>
<p>Numbers 19:14-22</p>	<p>¹⁴This is the ritual: When a person dies in a tent, whoever enters the tent and whoever is in the tent shall be unclean seven days; ¹⁵and every open vessel, with no lid fastened down, shall be unclean. ¹⁶And in the open, anyone who touches a person who was killed or who died naturally, or human bone, or a grave, shall be unclean seven days. ¹⁷Some of the ashes from the fire of cleansing shall be taken for the unclean person, and living water shall be added to them in a vessel. ¹⁸A person who is clean shall take hyssop, dip it in the water, and sprinkle on the tent and on all the vessels and people who were there, or on him who touched the bones or the person who was killed or died naturally or the grave. ¹⁹The clean person shall sprinkle it upon the unclean person on the third day and on the seventh day, thus cleansing him by the seventh day. He shall then wash his clothes and bathe in water, and at nightfall he shall be clean. ²⁰If anyone who has become unclean fails to cleanse himself, that person shall be cut off from the congregation, for he has defiled Adonai's sanctuary. The water of lustration was not dashed on him; he is unclean. ²¹That shall be for them a law for all time. Further, he who sprinkles the water of lustration shall wash his clothes³; and whoever touches the water of lustration shall be unclean until evening. ²²Whatever that unclean person touches shall be unclean; and the person who touches him shall be unclean until evening.</p>

¹ "Mei niddah" is often translated either as "water of lustration" or "water of separation." It is used to remove impurity, and appears in Numbers 19:9, 19:13, 19:20 to remove impurity from corpse contact, and 31:23 to purify warriors and captives after war.

² It is understood that he will also bathe his body. Milgrom, *Numbers*, 161

³ Bathing of his body is taken for granted (see verse 10). Milgrom, *Numbers*, 163

When looking at all of these rituals together, including those from Numbers 19, it becomes clear that there are three primary sources of impurity in the Biblical tradition: a corpse or carcass, *tzara'at*, and genital discharge. According to Milgrom, it is "inescapable that the impurities entered into this list have no intrinsic meaning in themselves but were selected because they serve a larger, overarching purpose."¹⁶⁵ An important common denominator exists among all of these sources of impurity: each represents a connection to death. As for corpse contact, this connection is clear. As for the others, Milgrom explains:

"Genital discharge from the male is semen, and from the female, blood. They represent the life force; their loss represents death. The case of scale disease also becomes comprehensible with the realization that the Priestly legists have not focused on disease per se, but only on the appearance of disease. Mold fabrics and fungous houses (13:47-58; 14:35-53) are singled out not because they are struck with scale disease but because they give that appearance. So too the few varieties of scale disease afflicting the human body: their appearance is that of approaching death. When Miriam is stricken with scale disease, Moses prays, 'Let her not be like a corpse' (Numbers 12:12). The wasting of the body, the common characteristic of the highly visible, biblically impure scale disease, symbolizes the death process as much as the loss of vaginal blood and semen."¹⁶⁶

In other words, each of these three sources of impurity represents the potential loss of life. Goodfriend concurs, adding that, "according to the Torah, other bodily excretions, such as feces, urine, or pus, are not sources of impurity because they have no symbolic connection with life."¹⁶⁷

The threat of death, either physical or spiritual, requires a powerful change agent to restore equilibrium and calm to both those affected and the wider community. That agent is water, as purification from every source of contamination involves water. Thus, the text once again emphasizes water's potent symbolic life-giving power. Either as *mayim* or *mayim*

¹⁶⁵ Milgrom, *JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, 345.

¹⁶⁶ Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics*, 12.

¹⁶⁷ Elaine Goodfriend, "Parashat Metzora," *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss (URJ Press, 2007).

chayim, water restores life to those symbolically threatened by death. This is supported by Milgrom's claim that, particularly in the Book of Leviticus, there is an "overarching symbolic system proclaims the victory of the forces of life over the forces of death."¹⁶⁸

Another commonality also underscores this theme of life affirmation. The purification ritual for the *metzora* in Leviticus 14:1-11, the purification ritual for male genital emissions in Leviticus 15:1-18, and the purification ritual for female genital emissions in Leviticus 15:19-30, all involve a liminal period of uncleanness of seven days. Each ritual also requires that, on the eighth day, an offering be made on behalf of the one afflicted. This time frame has symbolic resonance. Perhaps this suggests a connection between returning to life on the eighth day and affirming the life of a baby boy on the eighth day of his life, through the ritual of *brit milah*. Genesis 17:12 states: "And throughout the generations, every male among you shall be circumcised at the age of eight days," and Leviticus 12:3 echoes this law, stating: "On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised." Just as the first seven days of a child's life are considered dangerous and uncertain, so too are the seven days of ritual impurity, where an individual's status is uncertain. For the *metzora*, the *zav*, and the *niddah*, rejoining the community on the eighth day is the equivalent to being reborn and joining it for the first time.

Both *mayim* and *mayim chayim* appear in most of these rituals. One cannot ignore the fact that the two terms are not synonymous. Why the different names? Do they represent different elements? It is unlikely that the two types of water differ in chemical composition or nature, and I'd like to suggest that, physically, *mayim chayim* is no different from *mayim*. However, I believe that when water is designated as *mayim chayim*, it serves as an indication

¹⁶⁸ Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics*, 138.

of a significant symbolic transformation. Just as the discovery of *mayim chayim* marks Isaac's self-actualization in Genesis 26:19, each of these rituals marks a symbolic shift from death to life. Whenever *mayim chayim* appears in the Torah,¹⁶⁹ it is a signpost of an important transformative event.

There are two other purification rituals in the Book of Numbers that involve water as a purifying agent, although they do not make use of *mayim chayim*. Like the rituals in Numbers 19:1-22, the rituals outlined in Numbers 8:6-7 and Numbers 31:19-24 both purify an individual from contamination through corpse contact. These two rituals are not included in the ritual comparison chart above because the parallels to other rituals are less abundant. Nevertheless, significant connections exist.

Numbers 8:6-7 describes a ritual to purify Levites in preparation for the sacred service of handling the Tabernacle. As Milgrom explains, this purification should not be compared with the consecration service of the priests in Exodus 29 and Leviticus 8. The priests are consecrated through the anointment of oil in order to gain a holy status so that they may have access to the sacred objects, officiate at the altar, and enter the Tent. The Levites, on the other hand, are forbidden to enter the Tent or officiate at the altar. Levites "may only transport the dismantled Tabernacle and its sacred objects after they are covered by the priests, a task that does not require sanctification but purification."¹⁷⁰ Why must the Levites be purified? In order to qualify for dismantling and handling the holy Tabernacle, the Levites must be rid of impurities such as contact with the dead. Thus, their purification

¹⁶⁹ *Mayim Chayim* also appears in Zech. 14:8, where it provides a sense of ritual purity for Jerusalem that is similar to that which is portrayed in Leviticus. It also appears in Song of Songs 4:15, where it exemplifies the vitality and potential source of life that the speaker's "lover" embodies. Neither of these instances depicts a transformative event, but both conform to the pattern of using *mayim chayim* to signify a life-force that points toward a positive future.

¹⁷⁰ Milgrom, *JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, 61.

ritual in Numbers 8:6-7 reads as follows: "Take the Levites from among the Israelites and cleanse them. This is what you shall do to them to cleanse them: sprinkle on them water of purification [מים טהרה], and let them go over their whole body with a razor, and wash their clothes; thus they shall be cleansed."

We must note that this ritual calls for a special type of water: מים טהרה ("water of purification"). The washing of the priests prior to their consecration in Exodus 29:4 and Leviticus 8:6 was performed with ordinary water (*mayim*). Therefore, the use of *mei chattat* further differentiates Levite purification from priestly consecration. The "*chattat*" refers to the purification offering of a bull, mentioned in Numbers 8:8, as well as the ashes of the red cow, mentioned in Numbers 19:9. As we read in Numbers 19, those ashes are mixed with *mayim chayim* and are sprinkled on any person or object contaminated by the dead. Milgrom states that the Levite purification ritual "presumes knowledge of the law of Chapter 19... since the expulsion of the corpse-contaminated individual from the camp also implies the person's eventual restoration."¹⁷¹ In other words, the common language indicates that, like the contaminated individual in Numbers 19, the Levite will also experience purification and restoration through a water ritual.

The Levite purification ritual also resembles Numbers 19 – and Leviticus 14, for that matter – in that the purification of the Levite is symbolic, rather than concrete. As Milgrom notes, "the fact that sprinkling with special waters of purification (*mei chattat*) precedes shaving and washing indicates that its function is purely symbolic."¹⁷² If the water removed a physical state of uncleanness, shaving and washing would be unnecessary. Instead, water functions as the symbolic vehicle of spiritual transformation. And, like other purification

¹⁷¹ Milgrom, *JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, 61.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

rituals, the water acts as the bridge between death and life. The Levite is transformed from a state connected with death to a holy state that perpetuates the life of the community.

Numbers 31:19-24 also describes a ritual involving water to purify from corpse contamination. However, instead of purifying a Levite in preparation for sacred service, this ritual purifies warriors and captives upon returning from battle, as well as their objects that may have become contaminated. The text reads:

“¹⁹You shall then stay outside the camp seven days; every one among you or among your captives who has slain a person or touched a corpse shall cleanse himself on the third and seventh days. ²⁰You shall also cleanse every cloth, every article of skin, everything made of goats’ hair, and every object of wood.’ ²¹Eleazar the priest said to the troops who had taken part in the fighting, ‘This is the ritual law that Adonai has enjoined upon Moses: ²²Gold and silver, copper, iron, tin, and lead ²³- any article that can withstand fire - these you shall pass through fire and they shall be clean, except that they must be cleansed with water of lustration [מֵי נִדָּח]; and anything that cannot withstand fire you must pass through water. ²⁴On the seventh day you shall wash your clothes and be clean, and after that you may enter the camp.’”

This ritual appears to highlight another element capable of purifying objects: fire. The passage supplements the rules of purification of corpse-contaminated objects in Chapter 19 by insisting that not only must they be sprinkled with the water of lustration (מֵי נִדָּח),¹⁷³ but they must also be passed through fire or water. However, as Milgrom states, “the rabbis held that the passing of objects through fire or water is not part of the ritual of purification from corpse contamination but that it is a preliminary cleansing of these objects from food they may have absorbed.”¹⁷⁴ Therefore, it is still the water of lustration that purifies contaminated objects, and it is water (through cleansing in verse 19) that purifies people after corpse contamination in war.

¹⁷³ According to Adriane Leveen, the word נִדָּח occurs 29 times in the Tanakh, conveying at least three possible meanings: menstrual impurity (the most frequent meaning, as seen in Leviticus 15), indecency and lustration (the present case). She suggests that *niddah* in this verse conveys the nuance found in the term’s original meaning – being “set apart” – since the waters are to remain *outside* the camp. Yet, through purification, these waters restore the individual to her/his proper place *within* the camp. [Leveen.]

¹⁷⁴ Milgrom, *JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, 261.

Like the purification from corpse contamination in Numbers 19, the contaminated individual here must experience seven days of impurity. In addition, both chapters call for the individual to cleanse himself on the third and seventh day. This ritual differs from Numbers 19, however, in that the liminal period of seven days must take place outside the camp. In this sense, the contaminated individual is similar to the *metzora* of Leviticus 14. The element that ties all of these rituals together is the restorative power of water. Ultimately, through water, the status of an afflicted person can be restored, and a person can rejoin both the community and the realm of the living.

DETERMINING DIVINE JUDGMENT

In Exodus, Leviticus, and much of Numbers, water is used for priestly purposes as a vehicle for ritual purification. Yet, water also serves a different priestly function in Numbers 5:11-28. Here, instead of cleansing or purifying, water is used in a judicial context as a tool for Divine intervention. Specifically, water is used in a trial by ordeal for a woman suspected of adultery. This is the only time water is used in judicial matters. The ordeal and use of water are described as follows:

“¹¹Adonai spoke to Moses, saying: ¹²Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: If any man’s wife has gone astray and broken faith with him ¹³in that a man has had carnal relations with her unbeknown to her husband, and she keeps secret the fact that she has defiled herself without being forced, and there is no witness against her, ¹⁴but a fit of jealousy comes over him and he is wrought up about the wife who has defiled herself; or if a fit of jealousy comes over one and he is wrought up about his wife although she has not defiled herself, ¹⁵the man shall bring his wife to the priest. And he shall bring as an offering for her one-tenth of an ephah of barley flour. No oil shall be poured upon it and no frankincense shall be laid on it, for it is a meal offering of jealousy, a meal offering of remembrance that recalls wrongdoing. ¹⁶The priest shall bring her forward and have her stand before Adonai. ¹⁷The priest shall take sacral water [מֵי קֹדֶשׁ] in an earthen vessel and, taking some of the earth that is on the floor of the Tabernacle, the priest shall put it into the water. ¹⁸After he has made the woman stand before Adonai, the priest shall bare the woman’s head and place upon

her hands the meal offering of remembrance, which is a meal offering of jealousy. And in the priest's hands shall be the water of bitterness [מַיִם הַקְּדוּשִׁים] that induces the spell.¹⁹ The priest shall adjure the woman, saying to her, 'If no man has lain with you, if you have not gone astray in defilement while married to your husband, be immune to harm from this water of bitterness [מַיִם הַקְּדוּשִׁים] that induces the spell.'²⁰ But if you have gone astray while married to your husband and have defiled yourself, if a man other than your husband has had carnal relations with you' –²¹ here the priest shall administer the curse of adjuration to the woman, as the priest goes on to say to the woman – 'may Adonai make you a curse and an imprecation among your people, as Adonai causes your thigh to sag and your belly to distend; ²² may this water that induces the spell enter your body, causing the belly to distend and the thigh to sag.' And the woman shall say, 'Amen, amen!'²³ The priest shall put these curses down in writing and rub it off into the water of bitterness [מַיִם הַקְּדוּשִׁים].²⁴ He is to make the woman drink the water of bitterness [מַיִם הַקְּדוּשִׁים] that induces the spell, so that the spell-inducing water may enter into her to bring on bitterness.²⁵ Then the priest shall take from the woman's hand the meal offering of jealousy, elevate the meal offering before Adonai, and present it on the altar.²⁶ The priest shall scoop out of the meal offering a token part of it and turn it into smoke on the altar. Last, he shall make the woman drink the water.²⁷ Once he has made her drink the water, if she has defiled herself by breaking faith with her husband, the spell-inducing water shall enter into her to bring on bitterness, so that her belly shall distend and her thigh shall sag; and the woman shall become a curse among her people.²⁸ But if the woman has not defiled herself and is pure, she shall be unharmed and able to retain seed."

As in other priestly rituals, water plays a critical role here. The text presupposes that water has the power to secure divine judgment. This is evidenced by its name in verse 17: "מַיִם קְדוּשִׁים," or "holy water." This is a phrase that occurs uniquely here. Milgrom argues that the water receives this name because it is taken from the consecrated laver.¹⁷⁵ Yet, its immense power to mediate a curse suggests that the water merits this name based on its own character.

Through this ritual, the *mayim kedoshim* does not lose any of its power, but it does become transformed. Just as the woman's reputation is soiled by accusations of adultery, the *mayim kedoshim* becomes "מַיִם הַקְּדוּשִׁים," or "waters of bitterness." This, too, is a phrase that occurs uniquely in Numbers 5. Some scholars attribute the water's bitterness to the effect of

¹⁷⁵ Milgrom, *JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, 39.

the water upon the woman, while others theorize that a bitter ingredient was added.

Apparently, the meaning of this term is yet to be fully resolved.¹⁷⁶ Regardless, it is fair to assume that, in light of the elements that are added to the water, it would not have a pleasing taste.

Those two additional elements – the dust from the sanctuary floor and the written curse – presumably increase the water's efficacy. This supplementation contrasts the woman's *minchah* offering, from which elements are withdrawn. In fact, Milgrom observes that the procedure for the *mei marah* is symmetrically opposite to that of the *minchah*. He explains:

“During the recitation of the adjuration, this water is in the priest's hands while the woman holds the *minchah* in her hands. The priest, then, transfers the woman's *minchah* to the sacred realm of the altar and transfers the sacred water to the profane realm of the woman's body. Thus the introversion is symmetrically balanced: The priest is the medium by which the woman's profane offering is dedicated to [God] and the divinely empowered water enters her profane body.”¹⁷⁷

This water originates from the divine realm as “*mayim kedoshim*,” and, through this ritual, has the capacity to determine the holiness or profanity of the accused. Thus, not only is water invested with holiness, but it is also a representative of divine power.

It is important to note, however, that the water is a tool and representative of God, rather than being inherently powerful on its own. Elsewhere, water demonstrates its own inherent power, as in cases involving purification, but such is not the case here. This is evidenced by verse 21, a verse that Milgrom claims is a later addition to the text that serves to prevent one from thinking that the water contains its own supernatural authority. Verse 21 breaks up the flow of the text. According to scholars, there is little doubt that originally,

¹⁷⁶ Milgrom, *JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, 40.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 352.

verse 22 followed verse 20, a sequence that would flow smoothly and logically. Milgrom explains this interruption as follows:

“Fortunately the reason for the interpolation of verse 21 is not too difficult to discern. Without it the adjuration contains no mention of the name of God, and the formula gives the impression that the powers of the curse inhere in the water. It was therefore essential to add verse 21 to the adjuration to emphasize that the imprecation derives its force not from the water but from [God]. It may therefore be conjectured that originally the present formula (minus v. 21) was an ancient Near Eastern incantation for an ordeal employing magical water that did not invoke the name of any deity.... The priestly legislator, however, found the formula unacceptable because it ostensibly attributed the effect of the oath to the water itself.”¹⁷⁸

This distinction does not diminish the power or status of water. Rather, it merely highlights the fact that supreme power lies with God, and that water is God’s chosen vehicle and representative.

The symbolic significance of water as the nexus between life and death is evident in this text, as well. Take, for example, the *mei marah*. Perhaps the combination of water and dust symbolizes life and death. After all, humanity is created from dust (עפר) in Genesis 2, and that dust is dissolved (מִחְזָרָה) in the waters of the Flood in Genesis 6 and 7. Similarly, the dust of the sanctuary floor (עפר), along with the written words of the curse, dissolve (מִחְזָרָה) in the *mei marah* of Numbers 5. When water and dust combine in the Torah, life and death hang in the balance.

To what life and death might this particular combination refer? First, there is the defamation, or death, of the accused woman’s reputation in the community. Much like the *metzora* in Leviticus 14, whose symbolic life and connection to community are restored through a water ritual, the accused adulteress’ status in the community, is dependent upon the

¹⁷⁸ Milgrom, *JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, 353.

effects of water. Water mediates the curse for the woman, thereby possessing the power to determine either her life or her death.

Milgrom suggests that the *mei marah* also has the power to determine physical life or death, not of the accused woman, but of her seed. Numbers 5:22 describes the potential effects of the water: that the woman's belly will distend and her thigh will sag. Milgrom notes the similarity between the Hebrew word for "distend" – "*tzavah*," and the Akkadian word for "flood" – "*izabu*." He says that if a connection between these words truly exists, "the effect of the curse would be to flood the woman's uterus, thereby making certain that she would be unable to conceive."¹⁷⁹ The woman's punishment is not her own death, but rather, permanent sterility. The outcome of this ordeal depends entirely on a given woman's reaction to the water. This is the only case in biblical law where the outcome depends on a miracle.¹⁸⁰ Thus, we see the potential danger of water and its power to bring about death, in addition to its life-affirming capacity to redeem social status and represent the life-giving power of God.

¹⁷⁹ Milgrom, *JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, 41.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 350.

CHAPTER FIVE

RIPPLES OF REFLECTION: WATER IN DEUTERONOMY

REPETITIONS AND REFERENCES

Since the Book of Deuteronomy has its own literary unity, and is presented almost entirely as a retrospective speech by Moses, I have chosen to distinguish this Book from the others, despite many repetitions and overlapping themes. In a sense, this book is Moses' abridged review of all of the major events since Israel's departure from Horeb. Because every detail is not included, those that are recalled emphasize the most significant themes, those things of which the people need to be reminded as they prepare to enter the Promised Land. According to Jeffery H. Tigay, "the most important of these themes constitute two messages: that mistrusting and disobeying God lead to disaster, and that trusting and obeying [God] lead to success."¹⁸¹ That success, of course, involves not only survival, but also thriving; not only a relationship between the Israelites and God, but also a true covenant; and, not only reaching the Promised Land, but also settling in it and cultivating it.

In Moses' retelling of Deuteronomy, various water themes are also repeated. For the reader, these accounts underscore and illuminate the uses of water elsewhere in the Torah. In addition, such retelling and foretelling shows an intention to help the Israelites on both their physical and metaphysical journeys. One example of a common theme that has appeared before is that of water as an important point of reference. Some such points of reference in Deuteronomy are direct, and help to identify a particular place, as in the case of Deuteronomy 10:7, which mentions "Jotbath, a region of running brooks." Other references are more ambiguous.

¹⁸¹ Tigay, 6.

For example, Deuteronomy 1:1 reads: "...through the wilderness, in the Arabah near Suf...". According to Tigay, ancient translations take this to be *Yam Suf*. Yet, this could not be the same as the sea the Israelites crossed when leaving Egypt because, when the Israelites crossed the sea, Moses had no time to preach, as he is preaching here.¹⁸² This does not preclude the possibility that "Suf" refers to *Yam Suf*. Rather, it simply supports the previously stated point that *Yam Suf* has multiple meanings, and may refer to multiple bodies of water, depending on the context of its use. This oft-repeated ambiguity also appears when contrasting Deuteronomy 1:40 and 2:1,¹⁸³ which mention the *Yam Suf* in reference to the Red Sea,¹⁸⁴ and Deuteronomy 11:4,¹⁸⁵ which clearly uses *Yam Suf* in reference to the sea the Israelites crossed when fleeing Egypt.

BOUNDARIES AND BARRIERS

Just as Deuteronomy continues the motif of water as a point of reference, it also continues the motif of water as an important boundary. Water defines the boundaries of particular tribal territories within the Promised Land, as is evidenced by Deuteronomy 3:16, and water outlines the boundaries of the Promised Land as a whole. This is evidenced by Deuteronomy 1:7, 2:37, 3:17, 4:49, 11:24, and 34:2. Deuteronomy 11:24 is particularly interesting, as it loosely refers to water boundaries on three of the four sides of the land. It reads: "Every spot on which your foot treads shall be yours; your territory shall extend from the wilderness to the Lebanon [range] and from the River – the Euphrates – to the Western

¹⁸² Tigay, 4.

¹⁸³ Deut. 1:40: "... turn about and march into the wilderness by the way of the *Yam Suf*." Deut. 2:1: "We marched back into the wilderness by the way of the *Yam Suf*..."

¹⁸⁴ Tigay, 20.

¹⁸⁵ Deut. 11:4: "... what [God] did to Egypt's army, its horses and chariots; how Adonai rolled back upon them the waters of the *Yam Suf* when they were pursuing you..."

Sea." Since the point of this verse is to emphasize that God is giving Israel the entire land, from one end to the other, only its extremities are named: the deserts in the south, the Lebanon mountains and the Euphrates in the north, and the Mediterranean Sea on the west. The unmentioned eastern boundary, the Jordan, is implicit in the fact that the Israelites are about the cross it to enter the land.¹⁸⁶

This familiar motif of crossing boundaries appears several times in Deuteronomy. For example, Chapter 2, verses 13-14 read: "Up now! Cross the wadi Zered! So we crossed the wadi Zered. The time that we spent in travel from Kadesh-barnea until we crossed the wadi Zered was thirty-eight years, until that whole generation of warriors had perished from the camp, as Adonai had sworn concerning them." The wadi Zered serves as a physical boundary, but it serves as a symbolic boundary, as well. Tigay explains as follows:

"These verses mark the transition between the generation of the Exodus, and the generation that would enter the Promised Land. With the crossing of wadi Zered, God's oath was fulfilled; all those of age when the Israelites refused to proceed to the land had died (1:35). Now the conquest would begin. The transition is noted at this point because when the Israelites crossed wadi Zered they entered Moab, which would be the springboard for their conquests: from it they would march on the kingdoms of Sihon and Og and then on the Promised Land itself. The fulfillment of God's oath is a milestone whose importance is understood by a number of literary devices calling attention to it. The action stops as Moses declares that the oath was fulfilled."¹⁸⁷

In other words, this particular body of water is a physical boundary leading to the Promised Land, but it also marks the end of the Exodus generation. Water is the pivot point for a generational shift and a promise fulfilled.

That promise involves both passage into the Promised Land, and protection within it. The Jordan River is the final boundary to be crossed in order to actualize both. Deuteronomy

¹⁸⁶ Tigay, 115.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

12:10 reads: "When you cross the Jordan and settle in the land that Adonai your God is allotting to you, [God] will grant you safety from all your enemies around you and you will live in security." Thus, water serves as a promising geographic, physical, and existential boundary for the Israelites.

It is fitting that water should function in such a manner, as it has done so elsewhere in the Torah. Water is a critical symbolic boundary to be crossed in Exodus 14-15, in the form of the *Yam Suf*. That crossing marks the transition between slavery and freedom, and the formation of a nation. Transformation through water crossing also appears in Genesis 32, at the bank of the Jabbok, where Jacob transitions from a scared and self-centered individual to a concerned and empowered representative of a nation. All of these water crossings mark critical transitions, both for the individuals involved, and for the divinely-ordained destiny of the Jewish People.

God sanctions all of the aforementioned boundary crossings, but there are other boundaries across which God will not permit passage. One of such boundaries is not a body of water, but water is the reason for the prohibition to cross. Deuteronomy 23:4-5 reads:

"⁴No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted into the congregation of Adonai; none of their descendants, even in the tenth generation, shall ever be admitted into the congregation of Adonai, ⁵because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey after you left Egypt, and because they hired Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Aram-naharaim, to curse you."

In this case, the boundary is the communal assembly, and it is the Ammonites' and Moabites' withholding of water that prohibits their entry into the congregation. However, there is a curious discrepancy in the text. Just as the Israelites sought permission to cross foreign territory and purchase food and water in Numbers 20 and 21, Deuteronomy 2:27-29 reads:

“²⁷Let me pass through your country. I will keep strictly to the highway, turning off neither to the right nor to the left. ²⁸What food I eat you will supply for money, and what water I drink you will furnish for money; just let me pass through – ²⁹as the descendants of Esau who dwell in Seir did for me, and the Moabites who dwell in Ar – that I may cross the Jordan into the land that Adonai our God is giving us.”

According to these verses, the Moabites *did* provide water for the Israelites on their journey. And, Deuteronomy 2:37 indicates that the Israelites came to the border of the Ammonite territory, but does not record a request for provisions nor a denial of provisions. It is possible that this discrepancy could be the result of multiple redactors of the text, each relaying a different inherited tradition, but ultimately, the reason is uncertain. What is more important, for the purposes of this paper, is that access to water is repeatedly portrayed in connection to power, and that what one does with such water and power may impact future events.

The text highlights a role reversal of the Moabites and Ammonites. Whereas they once restricted the Israelites' passage across a boundary, they are now restricted themselves from crossing a boundary into the Israelite congregation. They are not the only ones who experience a type of role reversal and are restricted from crossing a particular boundary. Moses himself – the pre-eminent boundary-crosser – is prohibited from crossing the Jordan and entering the Promised Land. Unlike the communal assembly, Moses' forbidden boundary is a body of water. And, based on Numbers 20, one would assume that his prohibition is the result of his misuse of water. However, Deuteronomy 3:24 offers another explanation. Here, Moses tells the people of his plea to God to reconsider the prohibition against him entering the land, his plea to be allowed to cross the Jordan. The text reads:

“²⁴Adonai, You who let Your servant see the first works of Your greatness and Your mighty hand, You whose powerful deeds no god in heaven or on earth can equal! ²⁵Let me, I pray, cross over and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan, that good hill country, and the Lebanon.’ ²⁶But Adonai was wrathful with me on your account and would not listen to me. Adonai said to me, ‘Enough! Never speak to Me of this matter

again! ²⁷Go up to the summit of Pisgah and gaze about, to the west, the north, the south, and the east. Look at it well, for you shall not go across over the Jordan.”

The Jordan is the physical boundary of the Promised Land, but it is also a metaphysical boundary for Moses. It marks the end of his journey, and represents the limitations that have prevented him from continuing further. Moses’ purpose in life – to lead the Israelite people from slavery to freedom and into the Promised Land – has been fulfilled. This is, therefore, a bittersweet destination.

This passage is also particularly interesting because it offers a different explanation for Moses’ prohibition from entering the Land. In Numbers 20, it is understood that, as a result of the events at Massah-Meribah, Moses would not be permitted to enter. But here, Moses blames his situation on the people. According to Moses in Deuteronomy, it is because of the people’s shortcomings and errors that he is being punished. Moses restates this in Deuteronomy 4:13-23, which reads:

“[God] declared to you the covenant that [god] commanded you to observe – the Ten Commandments – and [God] inscribed them on two tablets of stone. ¹⁴At the same time Adonai commanded me to impart to you laws and rules for you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy. ¹⁵For your own sake, therefore, be most careful – since you saw no shape when Adonai your God spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire – ¹⁶not to act wickedly and make for yourselves a sculptured image in any likeness whatever: the form of a man or a woman, ¹⁷the form of any beast on earth, the form of any winged bird that flies in the sky, ¹⁸the form of anything that creeps on the ground, the form of any fish that is in the waters below the earth. ¹⁹And when you look up to the sky and behold the sun and the moon and the stars, the whole heavenly host, you must not be lured into bowing down to them or serving them. These Adonai your God allotted to other peoples everywhere under heaven; ²⁰but you Adonai took and brought out of Egypt, that iron blast furnace, to be [God’s] very own people, as is now the case. ²¹Now **Adonai was angry with me on your account and swore that I should not cross the Jordan** and enter the good land that Adonai your God is assigning you as a heritage. ²²For I must die in this land; **I shall not cross the Jordan.** But you will cross and take possession of that good land. ²³Take care, then, not to forget the covenant that Adonai your God concluded with you, and not to make for yourselves a sculptured image in any likeness, against which Adonai your God has enjoined you.

In this passage, Moses declares that it is the peoples' foolish actions, particularly in the case of the construction of the golden calf, that have determined his fate. Because he will lead them no further, Moses impresses upon the people that they have a great responsibility to uphold the covenant with God.

This is not the only discrepancy between previous narratives and Moses' retelling of the Israelite experience. In fact, there is another significant difference that also involves the story of the golden calf. Moses recalls the shameful episode in Deuteronomy 9, but a critical detail is changed. Whereas, in Exodus 32, Moses burns the calf, grinds it to dust, mixes it with water, and makes the Israelites drink the mixture, Deuteronomy 9:21 reads: "As for that sinful thing you had made, the calf, I took it and put it to the fire; I broke it to bits and ground it thoroughly until it was fine as dust, and I threw its dust into the brook that comes down from the mountain." In this version, the people are not forced to internalize their own sin. Rather, Moses simply disposes of the sinful object. According to Tigay, throwing an impure object into water was a common practice. He says, "Josiah did the same thing with pagan altars when he cleansed the Temple (2 Kings 23:12), and the prayer that God 'will hurl our sins into the depths of the sea' (Micah 7:19) is a metaphoric allusion to the same practice."¹⁸⁸ The details of the two versions of the story may differ, but, in both versions, Moses immediately destroys and disposes of the heretical icon, enabling the Israelites to restore their relationship with God. And, in both versions, Moses uses the vehicle of water to do so.

¹⁸⁸ Tigay, 101.

ABSTINENCE AND ASSISTANCE

The "brook that comes down from the mountain" in Deuteronomy 9:21 is noteworthy because it indicates that water is readily available at that particular location. Yet, in that same spot, Moses "stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights, eating no bread and drinking no water."¹⁸⁹ The presence of the brook indicates that his abstention from drinking water cannot be attributed to a lack of water. Rather, according to Tigay, Moses becomes ascetic as a result of his unique relationship with God. During his intimate encounter with God, "Moses was beyond human needs and concerns.... Moses' ability to survive for so long a time without food or drink can only be due to divine support."¹⁹⁰ The same thing happens a second time, after Moses witnesses the creation of the golden calf. In Deuteronomy 9:18, Moses abstains from eating bread and drinking water once again, but this time, he does so out of grief. In both cases, whether his abstention is a result of grief or spiritual ecstasy, his survival without water depends upon God's assistance.

CLEANSING FROM CULPABILITY AND CONTAMINATION

Moses' actions upon seeing the golden calf, including his asceticism and his destruction and disposal of the object, do not serve to cleanse or absolve the people of their guilt. Rather, they constitute Moses' method of coping with the situation on a personal and practical level, rather than a ritualistic level. Deuteronomy does, however, contain a ritual involving water that absolves the community of guilt of another kind. Deuteronomy 21:1-8 describes a ritual to be performed in the event that a dead body is found and the victim's killer is unknown. The text reads:

¹⁸⁹ Deut. 9:9.

¹⁹⁰ Tigay, 99.

“¹If, in the land that Adonai your God is assigning you to possess, someone slain is found lying in the open, the identity of the slayer not being known, ²your elders and magistrates shall go out and measure the distances from the corpse to the nearby towns. ³The elders of the town nearest to the corpse shall then take a heifer which has never been worked, which has never pulled in a yoke; ⁴and the elders of that town shall bring the heifer down to an everflowing wadi, which is not tilled or sown. There, in the wadi, they shall break the heifer’s neck. ⁵The priests, sons of Levi, shall come forward; for Adonai your God has chosen them to minister to [Adonai] and to pronounce blessing in the name of Adonai, and every lawsuit and case of assault is subject to their ruling. ⁶Then all the elders of the town nearest to the corpse shall wash their hands over the heifer whose neck was broken in the wadi. ⁷And they shall make this declaration: ‘Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see it done. ⁸Absolve, O God, Your people Israel whom You redeemed, and do not let guilt for the blood of the innocent remain among Your people Israel.’ And they will be absolved of bloodguilt.”

Tigay explains that the shedding of innocent blood creates guilt that lies on the entire community, and the community’s welfare is assured only if the guilt is eradicated.¹⁹¹

However, unlike some ritual practices outlined in Leviticus, this type of guilt is not eradicated through the vehicle of ritual sacrifice. The heifer in this passage is not a ritual offering to God. The method of its slaughter is non-sacrificial: there is no altar, there is no sprinkling of blood, the carcass is neither burnt nor eaten, the priests are only present for part of the ceremony, and even then, they have no specific task in it. Nor is this ritual a transmission of guilt to the heifer. Unlike the Azazel-goat in Leviticus 16, the elders slaughter the animal *before* washing their hands. Therefore, they cannot transfer guilt to the heifer, because the heifer cannot carry guilt away with it like the Azazel-goat.

According to Tigay, the theory that best explains this ritual is that the slaughter of the heifer at the wadi is a reenactment of the murder in a place where the bloodguilt will be harmless. Tigay argues that the timing of the handwashing ritual supports this theory. He writes:

¹⁹¹ Tigay, 183.

"In some of the Psalms 'washing the hands' is an idiom expressing innocence.¹⁹² In this rite, literally doing so over the calf and saying 'our hands did not spill this blood' could mean that the calf represents the victim and that the elders are dramatizing their (and the townspeople's) innocence...."¹⁹³

This theory involves a symbolic demonstration of innocence. But it is also possible that the ritual depicts a more concrete resolution. As Tigay writes, "the handwashing ritual could also be a purgative rite, literally removing the bloodguilt that has adhered to the townspeople's hands due to their inability to atone for it with the killer's blood."^{194,195}

It is important to note from where the water for this atonement ritual comes. In verse 4, the text demands that the elders bring the heifer to a "נַחַל עֵיטָן." This term has been translated in various ways. *Nahal* is a wadi or stream. Some scholars translate *eitan* as "strong" or rugged," but such wadis do not flow in every season or in every region of the land. The JPS Commentary translates it as "everflowing," but like other translations, the problem with this rendering is that there are not many perennial wadis in Israel, so it would be difficult to carry out this ceremony in most parts of the country. Perhaps these discrepancies point to the possibility that "*nahal eitan*" is meant to be metaphoric, rather than material. After all, the only other time this term appears in the Tanakh is in Amos 5:24, which reads: "Let justice well up like water, righteousness like an unfailing stream (*nahal eitan*)."¹⁹⁶ In this verse, the *nahal eitan* represents the power and enduring nature of righteousness. What then, might it represent in Deuteronomy 21:4?

¹⁹² Psalm 26:6: "I wash my hands in innocence..." Psalm 73:13: "...I kept my heart pure and washed my hands in innocence..." Hands full of blood are a well-known symbol of guilt: Isaiah 1:15: "...your hands are stained with crime..."

¹⁹³ Tigay, 474.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁵ The "killer's blood" is referring to the stated custom of capital punishment for the crime of murder.

Considering the numerous times that water has functioned as the nexus between life and death elsewhere in the Torah, it is conceivable that it functions in such a manner here, as well. The circumstances that necessitate this ritual call for an affirmation of life in the face of death. Discovering a dead person is frightening enough in itself, but it is even more frightening when the victim's killer is unknown, as the potential danger to others lingers. In addition, because the punishment for murder is death, the threat of the bloodguilt falling on the community leaves the entire community vulnerable. Therefore, going to the wadi to engage with the life-giving force of water may be seen as a symbolic transition from the community's encounter with death to the continuation of life. And, it is the water that enables the community to make such a transition.¹⁹⁶

That *nahal eitan* may also be representative of God, as water has acted as such in other passages of the Torah. If the ritual were to be performed at a regular wadi, the elders might find such a stream dried up, depending on the season. Such weakness or unreliability would *not* be an appropriate representative of God. Rather, a *nahal eitan* – which is everflowing, everpresent, unwavering – is a more suitable symbol of the Divine. In this manner, a *nahal eitan* is similar to a source of *mayim chayim*, continuously flowing fresh water that signifies the promise of life.¹⁹⁷ It is such dependability and reassurance that the Israelites need most when they encounter death at their doorsteps. Thus, the *nahal eitan* may remind the Israelites that, despite life's uncertainties, God will always be with them.

The only other time that water is mentioned in the context of ritual and washing in Deuteronomy is in Chapter 23, verses 11-12. Echoing Leviticus 15, this passage describes

¹⁹⁶ See Chapter Four on "Water in Priesly Ritual."

¹⁹⁷ *Mayim chayim* is directly associated with God in Jeremiah 2:13 and 17:13, where God is called: "מִקְוֵה חַיִּים" – "The Fount of Living Waters."

the ritual for purification after a nocturnal emission. However, the two descriptions of the ritual are not identical. According to Leviticus 15:16, a man who has experienced an emission of semen must bathe his entire body in water and remain unclean until the evening. Deuteronomy 23:11-12 adds to this ritual, requiring the man to also leave the camp until sundown. Both passages agree, however, in that water is the necessary agent to purify the man in question. And, as stated above in the "Water and Ritual" chapter, the water serves to bring the man from a state of death (being that an emission of semen for purposes other than procreation is considered a negation of life) back to a state of life.

BLESSINGS OF BOUNTY

In addition to the life-giving power of water, the people's dependence on God to provide it for them, particularly in the wilderness, is also a theme that has been repeated throughout the Torah. This appears in Deuteronomy, as well. For example, Deuteronomy 8:15 recalls the "water in the wilderness" motif, as it refers to God as one who led the people: "through the great and terrible wilderness with its seraph serpents and scorpions, a parched land with no water in it, who brought forth water for you from the flinty rock...." The water from the rock refers, once again, to the episode at Massah-Meribah. Tigay notes that the description of the rock as "flinty" is undoubtedly a hyperbole emphasizing how unexpected it was as a source of water.¹⁹⁸

Not only does Chapter 8 exhibit the significance of the theme of sustenance in the wilderness, but it also suggests that such provisions act as a foreshadowing of the bounty that

¹⁹⁸ Tigay, 95.

the Israelites may expect in the land.¹⁹⁹ For example, Deuteronomy 8:7 reads: "For Adonai your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with streams and springs and fountains issuing from plain and hill." Chapter 11 also picks up on this foreshadowing. Deuteronomy 11:10-17 reads:

¹⁰For the land that you are about to enter and possess is not like the land of Egypt from which you have come. There the grain you sowed had to be watered by your own labors, like a vegetable garden; ¹¹but the land you are about to cross into and possess, a land of hills and valleys, soaks up its water from the rains of heaven. ¹²It is a land which Adonai your God looks after, on which Adonai your God always keeps an eye, from year's beginning to year's end. ¹³If, then, you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, loving Adonai your God and serving [God] with all your heart and soul, ¹⁴I will grant the rain for your land in season, the early rain and the late. You shall gather in your new grain and wine and oil – ¹⁵I will also provide grass in the fields for your cattle – and thus you shall eat your fill. ¹⁶Take care not to be lured away to serve other gods and bow to them. ¹⁷For Adonai's anger will flare up against you, and God will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce; and you will soon perish from the good land that Adonai is assigning to you."

Not only do these verses differentiate the Israelites' future from their past, but they also reinforce the notion that water is a blessing bestowed upon them by God. In addition, this passage indicates that, since God waters the land of Israel, rainfall is conditional upon obedience to God. This reward for obedience or punishment for rebellion is emphasized again in Deuteronomy 28:12 and 28:24.

¹⁹⁹ Propp, *Water in the Wilderness*, 32.

WORDS OF WATER

Soften my heart,
O God of living waters,
that the shower of Scripture
I am about to read
may enrich the soil of my soul.
Rain down your wisdom
in sacred streams
to carry me like an upturned leaf
through the currents of this gray day.
Amen.

- Edward Hays

In Deuteronomy 32, associations between water and obedience to God continue. There, Moses describes the consequences of Israel's anticipated betrayal of God. In order to convince them to heed his words, Moses evokes the image of water to represent his teaching. In verse 2, Moses says: "May my discourse come down as the rain, my speech distill as the dew, like showers on young growth, like droplets on the grass." According to Tigay, "the poem expresses the hope and expectation that its words... will be received as eagerly as the rain is welcomed and have the same life-giving effect."²⁰⁰

Other passages in the Tanakh also use water from heaven, in both the form of dew and rain, to represent divine teaching. Job 29:21-23 reads: "Men would listen to me expectantly, and wait for my counsel. After I spoke they had nothing to say; My words were as drops of dew upon them. They waited for me as for rain, for the late rain, their mouths open wide." Hosea 14:6 reads: "I will be to Israel like dew; he shall blossom like the lily, he shall strike root like a Lebanon tree." And, Isaiah 55:10-11 reads: "For as the rain or snow drops from heaven and returns not there, but soaks the earth and makes it bring forth vegetation, yielding seed for sowing and bread for eating, so is the word that issues from My

²⁰⁰ Tigay, 299.

mouth." All of these verses draw upon knowledge of the life-giving power of water, and suggest that God's teaching affirms and supports life, as well.

This association between water and words of Torah relates to Robinson's interpretation of the episode at Marah and Elim in Exodus 15. He likens Moses' rod to the Torah and claims that obedience to Torah is the proper method of obtaining water, and thus, life. Again, he says: "The Torah is what gives access to that perennial source of life which lies at the heart of the universe. Without the Torah, one's fate is akin to that of men dying of thirst in the desert...".²⁰¹ Whereas Robinson argues that Exodus 15 portrays Torah as giving access to water, and Deuteronomy 32 portrays Torah as water, both underscore the notion that there is an associative link between Torah and water, Torah and life.

Because that teaching is so vital to survival, it is necessary to remind the Israelites that it is accessible to them. To achieve this goal, the text utilizes the image of water as a foil to such accessibility. In Deuteronomy 30:11-13, water represents the perceived immense distance between the people and comprehension of the law. The text reads:

"¹¹Surely, this instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. ¹²It is not in the heavens, that you should say, 'Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?' ¹³Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?'"

The image of "*yam*" as a formidable expanse resembles its use in Genesis and Leviticus, where it often serves as a metaphor for vastness. In addition, the Israelites were previously able to cross bodies of water that were overwhelming and seemingly insurmountable. Therefore, these verses remind them that the "sea" – and whatever it may represent – is not necessarily a prohibitive boundary for them and their growth.

²⁰¹ Robinson, 388.

THE DEEP, THE DEW AND THE DIVINE

As described above, the image of water as a gift from God for both the people and land of Israel is a common one in the Torah and throughout Deuteronomy. It is this theme that dominates the water imagery toward the end of the text. For example, Deuteronomy 33:13 reads: "And of Joseph he said: Blessed of Adonai be his land with the bounty of dew from heaven, and of the deep that couches below." Not only is it clear that God will saturate the land with moisture from heaven above, but God will also bless the land from the "תְּהוֹם רֹבֶצֶת קֵתָת" – the "deep that couches below." *Tehom*, of course, refers to the primordial water of chaos that is controlled by God's will. It can be summoned for destruction, as in the case of the Flood narrative, it can be summoned for creation, as in the case of the Creation narrative, or it can be summoned for blessing, as it is both here and in the other blessing of Joseph in Genesis 49:25.²⁰² It is quite significant that *tehom* – not to mention this promise of bounty, fertility, and God's surrounding presence – appears at both the beginning and the end of the Torah. It is a powerful bookend, highlighting both the centrality of water as a life-giving force, and the power of God to control it.

A similar bookend blessing appears in Deuteronomy 33:28, which reads: "Thus Israel dwells in safety, untroubled is Jacob's abode, in a land of grain and wine, under heaven's dripping dew [טל]." This is the final demonstration of metaphoric water imagery in the entire Torah. Like Deuteronomy 33:13, this verse uses the image of dew as a tender and precious gift from God. It also recalls Genesis 27:28, the blessing of Jacob by Isaac: "May God give you of the dew of heaven and the fat of the earth, abundance of new grain and wine." This parallel dew imagery is not accidental. Rather, it serves as another powerful

²⁰² Gen. 49:25: "The God of your father who helps you, and Shaddai who blesses you with blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that couches below..."

bookend for the Torah. It reinforces the notion that, from beginning to end, from the origins of the Jewish people onward, God will be a presence and provider for Israel. The people and land of Israel are meant to flourish, under God's benevolent care.

CONCLUSION

This thesis is unique in that it examines every instance of water in the Torah, of every conceivable kind. It therefore provides a comprehensive picture of both the pervasiveness and significance of water in the Torah. As we have seen, water takes on many different forms and functions in this sacred text. In both physical and symbolic terms, it gushes, sprinkles, quenches, washes, wells, falls, floods and flows. In doing so, it either signifies or acts to birth, transform, demarcate, purify, provide, save and destroy. What unifies the many features of water in the Torah is the recurring theme of the delicate balance between life and death. The text makes it clear that physical and spiritual survival are of the utmost concern to biblical authors. Water has the capacity to bring about death and devastation. Yet, more often than not, it acts as the quintessential life-giving substance. On both the material and metaphorical levels, water has the ability to grant, transform and renew life on earth. At rare times it has a power of its own, while at most other times it is strictly manipulated as a tool of God. It is unwieldy as chaos, but ever subservient to God's will.

God is both the decisive power and provider of water in the Torah. And, while God is the supreme arbiter of life and death, water is one of God's chief vehicles and representatives. The multiplicity of possible interpretations of water's rich imagery draws readers to explore the depths of personal and spiritual life. Water is like God, in that we depend on both for life and fulfillment. But, water is also unlike God, in that water is something with which every human being has physical contact and to which every person can relate. As such, water acts as an effective intermediary between the realm of the mundane and the realm of the sacred. The life-giving power of water is a constant reminder of the ultimate power of the Divine, the ultimate Source of Life.



“The face of the water, in time, became a wonderful book – a book that was a dead language to the uneducated passenger, but which told its mind to me without reserve, delivering its most cherished secrets as clearly as if it uttered them with a voice. And it was not a book to be read once and thrown aside, for it had a new story to tell every day.”

- Mark Twain



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