
A Debate in Rabbinic Literature:

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**"All is Foreseen and Free Will is Given":
A Debate in Rabbinic Literature**

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Digest

The theological opinions of the Rabbis concerning free will are as varied as the literature which presents them. This study opens one small window into the wide expanse of rabbinic thought on this subject.

Chapter One provides a general overview of the free will debate as it developed from biblical times through the rabbinic period. The tenet of divine providence was constantly expanded to incorporate not only the history of Israel, but also the history of all peoples; not only the realm of history, but also the realm of nature; not only the human domain, but also the world of the inanimate and unconscious.

Chapter Two focuses on rabbinic responses to the first three chapters of the book of Genesis. These chapters provide the basis for understanding how humankind was created, how the divine will and the human will relate through commandments, and how the question of human independence is played out. The most significant contribution the Rabbis bring to this material is the view that God wants humanity to be a partner in creation.

Chapter Three deciphers the rabbinic view of God's role in shaping personal destinies, particularly those of vocation and romance. Chapter Four then explores the rabbinic understanding of God's role in the unfolding of the political history of Israel.

Though limited, the materials collected and analyzed here show some clear trends. The Tanaitic and early Amoraic views tended to support the notion of free will, while the Amoraim of the middle period more often supported the idea of providence. The Conclusion speculates that this general shift in belief can be attributed to the political, religious, and philosophical changes that occurred when Roman secular rule gave way to

- Christian and Muslim religious rule. It is hoped that these insights will provide grounds for further fruitful investigation.

לאדם, הראשון בעולמי

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Introduction

Free will is the "philosophic and theological notion referring initially to the observation that human beings are able to choose between a number of possible courses of action, becoming, through their choices, the causes of the actions which they select."¹ Divine providence is "God's guidance or care of His creatures, emanating from His constant concern for them and for the achievement of His purposes. Providence includes both the supervision of the acts of human beings and the guidance of the actors in specific directions."² Although there were no universal rabbinic terms for "divine providence" nor "free will," these concepts were central to their pursuit of understanding the nature of God, the nature of humankind, and the nature of the relationship between them. And though the philosophical arguments of rabbinic literature were not recorded by scientific rules of logic, the midrashic and talmudic discussions reveal careful consideration of this age-old debate. Further, though the Rabbis sought to dedicate their lives to doing God's will, they recognized the human desire to act independently, to be creative and spontaneous. Their theology worked to balance these two goals by claiming that we are to be partners with God by choosing to fulfill God's commandments.

The most often quoted dictum on this topic is attributed to Rabbi Akiva: "All is foreseen and free will is given. The world is judged in goodness, and everything is according to the excess of deeds."³ Despite the seeming contradiction, the Rabbis held each of these beliefs to be true. The

¹ *Encyclopedia Judaica*, s.v. "Free Will." 7:125.

² *Ibid*, s.v. "Providence." 13:1279.

³ *Pirke Avot* 3:15.

two beliefs may often stand in conflict, but for the Rabbis they are not mutually exclusive. They saw the simultaneous reality of these beliefs as an indication of God's unending power and goodness.

The compact "Akiva" statement indicates how the theme of free will and providence easily bleeds into themes of divine retribution, humankind's good and evil inclinations, God's omniscience, and God's omnipotence. The Rabbis read the biblical text through all of these lenses simultaneously. While keeping the many related themes in the background, this study attempts to focus on the Rabbis' words which relate most directly to free will and divine providence.

The rabbinic period reflects a shift in thought from the belief that providence determines the course of nature and of collective nations to the belief that God also determines the course of individuals, both animate and inanimate objects.⁴ This thesis does not include God's determination of nature nor inanimate objects. The emphasis is limited to God's determination of human lives, individual and collective. The Rabbis did not attempt to resolve their contradiction of beliefs and neither will this thesis. It attempts to see where the Rabbis "drew the line." Were they more willing to accept God as a Force of Fate that has a plan for every human life? Did they resist the idea of a Puppeteer God, who determines every word and every deed? When did they think it acceptable to say, "It is not in Heaven"?⁵

Many biblical passages lend themselves to this discussion. Using cross references, subject and verse indices, this study explores the rabbinic view of the most significant biblical stories on this theme. In addition to the

47. ⁴ Manfred Vogel, *A Quest for a Theology of Judaism* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1987),

⁵ Baba Metzia 59a-b.

midrashic materials that spring directly from such passages, other relevant theological material are also analyzed.

The process of producing this rabbinic thesis has been most rewarding, and the hours of research have provided me with a much clearer understanding of how rabbinic texts are constructed. In many ways this rabbinic thesis is an extension of a paper I wrote for Dr. Edward Goldman three years ago. Dr. Goldman has taught me a love for the Rabbis' devotion and imagination which continues to inspire my own rabbinic work. I am deeply indebted to him and all of my teachers at the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion for sharing their wisdom and opening gates of insight.

Chapter One

An Overview of the Historical Development of Thought regarding Free Will and Divine Providence: from the Biblical Period to the Rabbinic Period

The Rabbis had no coined terms for the concepts of divine providence and free will.¹ However, they did know the arguments and complexities very well. They observed acts of providence and free will throughout the Bible and Hagiographa, not to mention throughout their own life experiences. Although according to Max Kedushin, the Rabbis considered providence and free will to be only auxiliary ideas rather than full value-concepts,² they constantly drove their thought towards a concretization of auxiliary ideas as well.³

Free will is "the doctrine that volition is self-originating and unpredictable."⁴ It was regarded by rabbinic Judaism as a fundamental principle. From biblical through rabbinic literature, every Jewish conception of humankind's moral and spiritual nature -- duty and destiny -- pivots on the idea of freedom.⁵ Knowledge and freedom, choice and, therefore, authority, are given to humankind, but only on the condition of accountability. The Rabbis consider the Torah to be the contract between the human will and the divine will.

Divine providence, by contrast, is the doctrine that volition is originated and predicted by God. Ephraïm Urbach distinguishes two aspects

¹ Ephraim Urbach, *The Sages* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975), 256.

² Max Kedushin, *The Rabbinic Mind* (New York: Bloch Publishing, 1972), 52-58.

³ Max Kedushin, *Organic Thinking* (New York: JTS Press, 1938), 205.

⁴ D.A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 102, note 22.

⁵ Samuel Cohon, *Man and His Destiny* (Cincinnati: lecture notes, 1954), v.1, p.30.

of providence. Both aspects place humanity at the focal point of the universe. One involves the government of the world, the control over nature, and the provision of the needs of all humankind, even the wicked and idolatrous.⁶ The other aspect consists of scrutinizing the ways and deeds of human beings. God dispenses justice and does righteousness, and therefore must judge the deeds of His creatures. The Rabbis consider the Torah to be the contract between the Provider and the provided, the Judge and the judged.

This chapter will attempt to trace the development of thought regarding free will and divine providence from the biblical period through the rabbinic period, in order to better understand the specific rabbinic interpretations studied in chapters two, three, and four.

The Biblical View of Free Will

Polytheism included a belief in fate as a fixed order of nature. Order was not thought to be dependent on a divine being with a universal moral purpose. Furthermore, polytheists believed one could alter the will of a god by performing magic or divination. By contrast, the biblical view introduced the concept of a God who has understanding and will, unlimited control over nature and a personal relationship with all of humanity, which depends on moral and immoral acts.⁷ The Bible can be viewed as a record of divine providence in the world, over both the individual and the collective.

Biblical belief does not deny the existence of a fixed natural order. However, there was a basic theological shift from the belief in a God of nature to the belief in a God of both nature and history.⁸ Because God was believed

⁶ Examples are found in *Mechilta deRabi Ishmael*, Shirata 3 and Amalek 1.

⁷ "Providence," in *Encyclopedia Judaica* 13 (1971):1279.

⁸ Julius Guttman, *Philosophies of Judaism* (New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, 1964), 11.

to be the Creator of the universe, it was believed that nature belongs to God and that God exists beyond the laws of nature. History, however, was considered to be a shared endeavor, the result of the interplay between the divine will and the human will. Perhaps the overarching theme of the Bible is the tension between the two wills, between what should be and what actually is, between God's demands and humanity's failure, on the whole, to respond adequately to divine expectations.⁹ But the God of the Bible is the God who says, "Seek Me and live."¹⁰ The God of the Bible encourages humankind to join its will to His, so that humanity will come to know the benefits of God's ways, and prosper. These beliefs and those that follow – sin and retribution, justice and mercy – mark a critical shift in the evolution of religious thought.

Biblical theology eliminated the notion, found in many contemporary pagan mythologies, of a primordial, inescapable Fate to which humankind and gods alike were subject. The pagan system included a Fate that could at times be manipulated through incantation, sacrifices, and divination. Instead, the Bible is preoccupied with the moral condition of humankind, with the signs of divine providence, and with the unconditional will of a God not limited by destiny or Fate.¹¹

The Bible affirms or consistently assumes that God has taught humanity what is right and wrong, has set before humanity the consequences of both behaviors, and in turn, has left them to choose. The Bible records the repetitions of these three steps again and again – first, with Adam in the Garden, then with Noah and the so-called Noahide laws, and finally with all

⁹ Robert Seltzer, *Jewish People, Jewish Thought* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1980), 50.

¹⁰ Amos 5:4-6.

¹¹ Robert Seltzer, *Jewish People, Jewish Thought* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1980), 50.

of Israel at Sinai.¹² It was a priority of the biblical writers for humanity to claim responsibility for its misdeeds rather than blame God for human limitations. Psalm of Solomon 9:4 says, "Our deeds are in the choice and power of our soul, to do righteousness and iniquity in the works of our hands." This theme was retained throughout the rabbinic period¹³ and is still today at the core of mainstream Judaism.¹⁴ As Julius Guttman writes, "In the Bible, belief in the freedom of the human will was an immediate religious certainty. For the Rabbis it was a doctrinal proposition."¹⁵

Deuteronomic Literature on Free Will

The authors of the Deuteronomic books (i.e. Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, and Kings), more clearly than any other biblical voice, emphasized the theme of human choice. The strongest example of their belief system is found in Deuteronomy 30:15-20. "...I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life -- so that you and your offspring will live -- by loving the Lord your God, heeding to His commandments, and holding fast to Him..." The siege and fall of Samaria, the Assyrian deportations of the Northern Israelites, and the end of the Northern kingdom in 722 B.C.E. greatly influenced the religious thought of the day. The events of 587 B.C.E., when the Babylonians took siege of Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple, and deported the Israelite leadership to Babylonia, only further developed the Deuteronomic ideology. It was believed that when people made wrong

¹² George Foot Moore, *Judaism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927), 453.

¹³ e.g. Sifre Deuteronomy 53-54.

¹⁴ George Foot Moore, *Judaism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927), 455.

¹⁵ Julius Guttman, *Philosophies of Judaism* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 38.

choices and failed to uphold their covenantal obligations, they swiftly received a deserved punishment.¹⁶

The person living in biblical times "never questioned that humans are capable of choosing, never questioned that there are consequences for their actions. Nor did they question that all things are ordained and brought to pass by God in accordance with His wisdom and benevolent will."¹⁷

However, Deutero-Isaiah also firmly teaches that human knowledge and actions are limited before God. For example, God's offering of blessing and curse, life and death in Deuteronomy 30:19, shows that indeed humans can choose either alternative, but must in turn pay the consequences. Adam made the choice of death when he broke from God's command, and was then made mortal, limited. The question is asked: Is God to blame for creating a less-than-perfect being? Or is human limitation only for the purpose of exaggerating God's glory and omnipotence?¹⁸

The Prophetic View of Free Will

Unlike the Deuteronomic voice, the prophets had no straight-forward theory about who ultimately determines human conduct. They made two clashing assumptions. First, they proclaimed their faith in a universal, sovereign, omniscient God. Second, they asserted that human behavior springs from one's own decisions. Jeremiah, for example, declared that God fashions the lives of nations like a potter molds clay. But he also saw the

¹⁶ Robert Seltzer, *Jewish People, Jewish Thought* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1980), 98.

¹⁷ George Foot Moore, *Judaism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927), 454.

¹⁸ Solomon Schechter, *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1993), 286.

results of human choices of deceit and weakness. His solution was found by asking God for help in making the right choices.¹⁹

The prophets teach that not only is humanity free, but God, too, is free in the exercise of His will. If a nation repents or sins, God may choose to change His plan in order to exact retribution. For example, Jonah understood that when the people of Ninevah would repent, God would change His will. The main teaching of the prophets was the message of the Rabbis and is still at the core of mainstream Judaism: that humanity's goal is to inter-weave its will with the will of God. Human beings are free to direct their own lives, but only when living under God's law, can one be "the captain of his own soul."²⁰

The critical difference between classical prophecy and apocalyptic literature is their respective attitudes toward the formulation of history. The prophets addressed their own age directly, calling for immediate political and ethical choices that could affect the impending divine judgment. For them, the future remained open, in that God's decision could be changed if humanity repented.²¹

Apocalyptic Literature on Free Will

In contrast, the apocalyptist viewed history as a closed and unified process, seeing his own age as the last link in a long chain of events unfolding in a preordained sequence (e.g. Daniel). While the prophet was devoted to

¹⁹ Samuel Cohon, *Man and His Destiny* (Cincinnati: lecture notes, 1954), v.1, p.31.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 30.

²¹ Robert Seltzer, *Jewish People, Jewish Thought* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1980), 160-161.

the human role in the history of this world, the apocalyptic visionary was focused on the "other world," predestined by God.²²

The most important point of contact between the apocalyptic and wisdom traditions of the Hellenistic age is the idea of a predetermined cosmic order. The apocalyptic tradition translated this order into God's providential plan. The Dead Sea sect in particular stressed that God has preknowledge of every event and also that God decrees everything in advance. For example, both the wicked and the righteous are determined to be who they are even before they are formed. According to Jubilees 3:10, everything is written beforehand in the "tablets of the heavens."²³ Ecclesiastes, which stresses the vanity of human effort, asserts that the pattern of providence is inaccessible to human understanding.²⁴

In both apocalyptic and rabbinic literatures, the authors kept the fulfillment of ancient promises in mind. Both searched the texts to discover how history was guided by providence. Both searched the past in order to identify the hand of God in current events and to announce the end of time, which was thought to be very near.²⁵ However, when the Rabbis consulted the past, it was for the sake of the present, and in a veiled manner, of the future. In contrast, the apocalyptic literature looked to the past for the sake of predicting eschatology. Some of the Rabbis were interested in such work, but the predominating voices rejected it. They emphasized the value of this world when they taught, "Better is one hour of repentance and good deeds in this world than all the life of the world to come. Better is one hour of

²² Ibid.

²³ "Providence," in *Encyclopedia Judaica* 13(1971): 1280.

²⁴ Robert Seltzer, *Jewish People, Jewish Thought* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1980), 161.

²⁵ Renee Bloch, "Midrash," in *Approaches to Ancient Judaism* 1(1978)45-46.

serenity in the world to come than all the life in this world."²⁶ The Rabbis also rejected the apocalyptic view concerning good and evil. While apocalyptic literature taught that humankind created sin and evil, the Rabbis were sure that God is the source of both good and evil.²⁷ What the Rabbis did inherit from apocalyptic thinking was "a profound sense of the supernatural, which caused them to neglect secondary causes and absorb the human into the divine."²⁸

Philo of Alexandria on Free Will

Under the influence of Hellenism, Jewish concern for the issue of humanity's ability to do good or evil became acute. Philo lived from 20 B.C.E. to 50 C.E., at the center of conflicting currents in Hellenistic philosophy. Breaking with the traditional Jewish way of thinking, he debated the question of free will in philosophical terms, based on philosophically sound premises and developed with philosophical arguments.²⁹ Although Philo described God as "the pilot who manages the universe with saving care,"³⁰ he spoke against the Pantheists and the Stoics who left no room for free agency. He taught that God provides freedom as the very essence of human beings; only life's difficulties make it hard to do the right thing, but every human being has the potential for good, and God helps us to tap into our potential for good. He regarded freedom of choice as a gift from God, which was granted to

²⁶ Pirke Avot 4:22, attributed to Rabbi Jacob.

²⁷ Samuel Cohon, *Man and His Destiny* (Cincinnati: lecture notes, 1954), v.1, p.31.

²⁸ Renee Bloch, "Midrash," in *Approaches to Ancient Judaism* 1(1978)46.

²⁹ George Foot Moore, *Judaism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927), 360.

³⁰ Samuel Cohon, *Man and His Destiny* (Cincinnati: lecture notes, 1954), v.1, p.32.

humanity in order to nullify the laws of nature that rule him.³¹ Philo taught, "without God's aid, man is unable to do good by his own power."³²

Consistently maintaining human self-determination, Philo interpreted the biblical view that human beings are created in the image of God to mean "in the image of God's reason." According to him and his Aristotelean contemporaries, intelligence is the only imperishable part of a human being. "For it alone, the Father who formed it deemed worthy of liberty, and having loosened the bonds of necessity, let it range at large, having gifted it with a portion such as it was able to receive of his own most proper and distinctive possession, the faculty of volition."³³ God made human beings unrestrained and free, acting voluntarily according to choice. And human beings are also endowed with a free and self-controlled judgment. One is capable of understanding the system of blame received for premeditated misdeeds, and praise for voluntary righteousness.

Philo's strength and weakness were in his philosophical approach to the problem of free will. His system of human moral freedom seems to be maintained against scientific determinism, but his influence was limited, because he did not speak in religious terms that his people could appreciate. Philosophical arguments did not hold up in the face of the human religious experience of total impotence before God.³⁴

Scholars add that Philo was not philosophically convincing either. His position was inconsistent as he simulataneously stressed the human free will

³¹ Ephraim Urbach, *The Sages* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975), 273.

³² Julius Guttman, *Philosophies of Judaism* (New York: Holt, Phinehart and Winston, 1964), 27, note 39.

³³ George Foot Moore, *Judaism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927), 458-459.

³⁴ Julius Guttman, *Philosophies of Judaism* (New York: Holt, Phinehart and Winston, 1964), 27.

and the divine will. His attempts to bridge this contradiction are artificial.³⁵ On the one hand, he asserted that human beings are free to know the difference between good and evil and to choose between them. On the other hand, he expressed that human choices are "predetermined by the struggle between one's inclinations and by the influence of external forces."³⁶

Philo's thought differs from the Tana'im in that he did not believe evil emanates from God, but rather from nature. Out of response to dualism and astrology, the Rabbis never denied that God is also the Creator of evil.³⁷ Tractate Bava Batra reasons that "The Holy One, blessed be He, has created the evil inclination and He has created the Torah, its antedote."³⁸ Rava teaches that Israel voluntarily accepted the Torah, which sets bounds to the rule of fate. By virtue of the Torah, Israel became free and could pray to God and earn His favor.³⁹

The Influence of Hellenist Philosophy

Different notions about the immortality of the soul and about destiny divided Greek schools of philosophy. According to Josephus,⁴⁰ the question of fate and choice divided the Jewish sects during the Second Temple period as well, although scholars are suspicious of how simply Josephus described the divisions between sects.⁴¹

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ "Free Will," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 7(1971): 126.

³⁷ Ephraim Urbach, *The Sages* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975), 273 and 275-277.

³⁸ Bava Batra 16a.

³⁹ Ephraim Urbach, *The Sages* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975), 283.

⁴⁰ Antiquities 8:5-9.

⁴¹ Ibid, 284.

The Sadducees, like the Graeco-Roman Epicureans, rejected the idea of fate and the notion of divine providence altogether. They believed that every act lies completely within the power of human beings, whose will chooses between good and evil.⁴² The Sadducees' God was completely separate from every evil. They considered that God was incapable of doing or looking with complacency upon anything evil. God/Goodness and evil lie open to human choice. According to each person's inclination, one chooses one or the other.

The Essenes, like the Graeco-Roman Stoics, followed the Pythagorean mode of life. They believed that all human actions were predestined by providence. Human beings have no freedom. Fate governs all.⁴³ Urbach notes that Qumran studies support Josephus' explanation of the Essenes belief system.⁴⁴

Josephus presents two views of the Pharisaic belief of free will, but it is clear that, like the more moderate Stoics, the Pharisees took the middle view. First, Josephus explained their position to have been that some actions, but not all, are the work of fate, while others are within the power of the individual. Elsewhere,⁴⁵ Josephus explained that the Pharisees believed fate is a part of every action, but that primarily the choice of action is left to man. Josephus wrote of the Pharisaic belief, "It was God's good pleasure that there should be a fusion and that the will of man with his virtue and vice should be admitted to the council-chamber of fate."⁴⁶ Whatever was the extent of the power they attributed to destiny, the Pharisees clearly did not deprive the

⁴² Antiquities 8:5-9.

⁴³ Ibid 15:10:4 ¶ 371.

⁴⁴ Ephraim Urbach, *The Sages* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975), 255.

⁴⁵ Wars 2:8-14.

⁴⁶ Antiquities 18:1-3.

human free will of its righteousness and wickedness. The Rabbis inherited a synthesis of these Pharisaic views -- that the freedom which humans enjoy is only a manifestation of divine providence.⁴⁷

Josephus used "destiny" to mean "the decrees of God." However, according to George Foot Moore, no contemporary reader could have understood him in any such sense, because that was not the current conception of "destiny." Josephus himself described "destiny" as a determining factor, distinct from God, albeit subordinate to Him.⁴⁸ The Jewish sects disagreed about the role destiny plays, but they uniformly understood the concept of destiny to be a function of God, not separate from Him in any way.⁴⁹

"Dogmatic atheism and theoretical skepticism are the outcome of philosophical thinking, to which the Jews had no inclination."⁵⁰ Consistently maintaining the notion of divine providence as fundamental, the Rabbis defined the atheist not as the one who does not believe in God's existence, but as the one who does not believe in divine providence.⁵¹ Some scholars suggest this is because it was unthinkable to deny the existence of God, so they went to the next most fundamental belief. Vogel suggests that the rabbinic definition of the atheist was in fact, in response to Epicureanism, which maintained the belief in the existence of gods, but only gods that are denied awareness and involvement with the world. Epicureanism threatened the basic fundamental and sensitive tenet of Judaism, that God

⁴⁷ Ephraim Urbach, *The Sages* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975), 255.
George Foot Moore, *Judaism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927), 456.
Samuel Cohon, *Man and His Destiny* (Cincinnati: lecture notes, 1954), v.1, p.33-34, note 17.

⁴⁸ Bell. Judaism 2:8-14, Antiquities 18:1-3.

⁴⁹ George Foot Moore, *Judaism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927), 457.

⁵⁰ George Foot Moore, *Judaism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927), 360.

⁵¹ Genesis Rabbah 26:6.

interacts with the world. The Epicurean, or the *apicorus*, is the prototype of the non-believer in rabbinic Judaism.⁵² The *apicorus* is the heretic who states, "There is neither judgment nor Judge."⁵³

The Gnostics' View of Free Will

The Gnostics believed in grace and election, but they also recognized a small element of freedom. Valentinus said there are three types of human beings -- spiritual, material, and animal. Adam was all three, but now each human being is only one of the three types. The "material" person makes only corruption. Some "animal" people are good and some are evil. But the "spiritual" person attains perfect knowledge of God.⁵⁴ One's nature is fixed, but within one's category, one has a range of choices.

To counter these Gnostic claims, the Rabbis stressed that all people were born from Adam.⁵⁵ They wrote countless midrashim and parables describing the human ability to change, repent, fail and succeed. They taught that if one wants to defile himself, the door is open for him to do so, but if one wants to purify himself, God will help him along the way. In addition, because they rejected the Gnostic emphasis on the importance of the individual, the Rabbis explained that freedom transcends personal significance. When one chooses to do this or that, he must consider the impact his actions have on the world beyond himself. By the choice of his

⁵² Manfred Vogel, *A Quest for a Theology of Judaism* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1987), 41 and 48.

⁵³ Leviticus Rabbah 28:1.

⁵⁴ Samuel Cohon, *Man and His Destiny* (Cincinnati: lecture notes, 1954), v.1, p.34-35.

⁵⁵ Ibid, note 37.

actions, one may increase the power of the good or evil in the world and may even hasten or retard the advent of the coming of the Messiah.⁵⁶

Early Christianity and Free Will

The Church Fathers thought the fixity of the Gnostic view of the human moral character was a dangerous belief that left no room for human improvement. Instead, they believed that one's moral make-up is determined by the human free will and God's free will. They taught that one can only be good through obedience to God. Their "doctrine of salvation through works sought to overcome the moral danger of determinism."⁵⁷

Early Christianity also took the pessimistic view of human nature and moral depravity as a consequence of the "The Fall" of Adam and thereby all of humanity. At that moment in the garden, all human freedom was reduced to a mere shadow. Since then, humanity suffers under the power of sin and the only consolation is found in the fact of God's grace.⁵⁸ Pauline Christianity emphasized that grace is a free and unmerited gift from God. It is meant to regenerate humankind, bring us closer to God, and thereby sets us free.⁵⁹

Rabbinic Judaism can be contrasted to the Pauline belief that personal salvation is achieved in an instantaneous moment of faith, a transforming reception of God's grace that radically reshapes the individual's character. In stark contrast, the Rabbis insisted that immortality is earned only through a continual effort of the mind and will. In contrast to Pauline Christianity, the

⁵⁶ Ibid, note 39.

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 35-36.

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 34.

⁵⁹ Robert Seltzer, *Jewish People, Jewish Thought* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1980), 295.

rabbinic view is that God aids humankind through His attribute of mercy, but grace can never be completely unmerited.⁶⁰ The Rabbis may not have been able to resolve the dilemma of determination and free will in a theoretical fashion, but they rejected the alternatives that seemed to be a flight from human responsibility. For example, Hillel's maxim, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?"⁶¹ is an emphatic expression of human freedom to combat passivity, selfishness, and procrastination.

In the Gospel of John (8:32), Jesus says, "If you know my word, you will know the truth and the truth will make you free." Similarly, Rabbinic Judaism says, the Torah brings true freedom. Rabbi Joshua ben Levi teaches, "Don't read 'graven commandments,' read 'freedom commandments,' for the free person is the one who studies Torah."⁶² Carson points out that with the destruction of the Temple, Christianity could easily ask, "Why keep the commandments, if this is how God rewards you?" The Rabbis constantly insisted that the relationship between God and Israel was unique and not threatened,⁶³ but the Rabbis were forced to ask the very same question themselves.

The Rabbis' Debate: *"One is led (by God) to follow the way he chooses to pursue" (Makkot 10b).*

⁶⁰ Ibid, 294.

⁶¹ Avot 1:14.

⁶² Avot 6:2. This comparison is made in Robert Seltzer, *Jewish People, Jewish Thought* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1980), 297.

⁶³ D.A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 103.

Neither the Tanaim in the first and second centuries, nor the Amoraim in the third and fourth centuries produced a solution to the problem of free will. They were divided in their views. Most who voiced their views believed in providence **and** free choice, but each fixed his boundaries and reconciled them differently. Sometimes the Rabbis would propose that the divine and human wills act simultaneously. Elsewhere they would suggest that human beings are initially free, but that the path one chooses receives an additional boost from God. For example, it is taught that God increases the strength of the righteous, so they may do His will. "If you guard yourself three times from sin, God will guard you from then on."⁶⁴ Similarly, Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish teaches that if a person comes to defile himself, the opportunity is provided for him (by God); if one comes to purify himself, he is actually helped (by God) to do it.⁶⁵ However qualified, a core of self-determination remained consistent in the rabbinic view; the entire rabbinic theological structure of reward and punishment pivoted on the idea that human beings are free to do good and evil. As Josephus mentions, the Rabbis sought to maintain both doctrines despite the tension between them.

The Rabbis were a part of a complex world of many different peoples, religions, and levels of education. The influences of the first centuries range from the philosophy of the Stoics on one extreme to astrology and popular belief on the other. By the end of the Tanaitic period and throughout the Amoraic period these influences come to the Sages through a wide variety of channels. Some Rabbis intentionally exposed themselves to Hellenistic philosophy. Others were most influenced by the folk superstitions of the

⁶⁴ Shabbat 104a.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

common Jew. Rabbinic trends were shaped simultaneously from within and from without.

In addition to the religious movements and philosophical trends mentioned above, the Rabbis' views of free will and providence were greatly influenced by two tragedies – the destruction of the second Temple and the dispersion of the Jews throughout the Roman Empire in 70 C.E.; and the defeat of the Bar Kochba Revolt of 132-135 C.E. The political, economic, and religious implications of these losses must not be underestimated. And the rising influence of Christianity had no less severe an impact. Judaism responded with more than just the *Birkat HaMinim*. D.A. Carson describes rabbinic Judaism as, at least in part, a counter reformation.⁶⁶

There are some constants, however, throughout the rabbinic writings: God is One, God is unchangingly merciful and just, and God is sovereign.⁶⁷ God has the power to do in His world whatever He wills and He has the right as the Creator to deal as He wills with His creatures. Judaism is consistently clear that God does not ever use this power like an almighty tyrant, but with wisdom and justice and for a supremely good end.⁶⁸ The Rabbis were forever cautiously walking the line to preserve both the dignity of humankind's moral nature and God's sovereignty.

Carson suggests that God's sovereignty begins to crumble when the Rabbis insisted on the existence of the human evil inclination.⁶⁹ They taught that humanity is divided into three categories. The righteous are ruled by the

⁶⁶ D.A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 84-85, note 3.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 100, note 15.

⁶⁸ George Foot Moore, *Judaism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927), 379.

⁶⁹ D.A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 101.

good inclination. The wicked are ruled by the evil inclination and the middle class are ruled by the good inclination at one moment and by the evil inclination the next.⁷⁰ God created the evil inclination and the Torah as its remedy, and one's treatment of God's commandments determines his class. When an individual makes the fulfillment of the Torah his main concern, the evil inclination does not overcome him.⁷¹ Furthermore, it is taught that the evil inclination was only given so we may receive reward for conquering it.⁷²

The Rabbis viewed the Torah as the embodiment of the divine will. Simultaneously, however, the observance of its commandments is both the task given to Israel by God⁷³ and the badge of real freedom. Israel's heart draws near to God and chooses to do His service. No manipulation or persuasion is necessary, only love.⁷⁴ And piety was a fundamental value for the Rabbis as well. However, piety before God, at the risk of surrendering human will, was unacceptable. Piety is not the mere observance of the divine command. It is an imitation of the divine model. For example, God commands, "Be holy, for I, the Lord, your God am holy." The Rabbis were sure to maintain the activist character of the prophets. Again, the compromise was found in the function of the commandments by which God addresses the human will and shows the way to a love relationship between humanity and God.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Avot deRabi Natan 32. Ecclesiastes Rabbah 4:15 prefers two classes.

⁷¹ Avot deRabi Natan 16, Berachot 61a, Baba Batra 16a, Kiddushin 30b, Sukkot 52b, Jerusalem Talmud Yevamot 4:2, Sifre on Deuteronomy 11:18.

⁷² Yoma 69b, Sanhedrin 64a.

⁷³ Julius Guttman, *Philosophies of Judaism* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 37.

⁷⁴ Solomon Schechter, *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1993), 70.

⁷⁵ Julius Guttman, *Philosophies of Judaism* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 32.

It is important that this study makes mention of the Rabbis' belief in "merit theology." Both the Tana'im and the Amora'im put a great emphasis on the merits of the patriarchs when considering how God bestows His providence. Oftentimes when they could not find any other explanation for why things happen as they do, they attributed it to divine retribution in favor of or in opposition to the deeds of one's ancestors. For example, there was a disagreement among the Rabbis as to whether or not Israel's restoration to Jerusalem could take place irrespective of her repentance and merits, because the future was already determined based on the merits of the patriarchs.⁷⁶

The Rabbis tried to preserve the transcendence, justice, and sovereignty of God, but Carson suggests that by developing merit theology, they cut human beings free from any accountability for their actions.⁷⁷ Merit theology risks raising humanity to a position they have not earned through their own merit, only through God's mercy for the great figures of the past. Instead of taking the initiative in every age and offering mercy to the present generation, God merely assists and rewards their efforts for the sake of a past relationship. Merit theology may solve some immediate riddles of fate, but in many ways, it only heightens the tension between free will and divine providence.

God's sovereignty is consistently emphasized throughout rabbinic literature. However, in Targumic literature, God's knowledge and power are also described as absolute and limitless. If the original wording of a biblical passage seemed to allow for doubts regarding God's omniscience, omnipotence or the like, the Rabbis were quick to clarify in their

⁷⁶ D.A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 104, note 28.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 108-109.

translations.⁷⁸ For example, Genesis 18:14 asks rhetorically, "Is anything too hard for God?" One translation, TJ1, makes a leap and translates the verse to ask, "Is it possible for anything to be hidden from God?" The reason for the change was to remove the slightest hint that something was beyond God's power. Other targumim were designed to show that God is never surprised by human behavior.⁷⁹

Akiva's Dictum: *"All is foreseen and free will is given; and the world is judged by mercy, yet all is according to the excess of deeds."*

(Pirke Avot 3:16)

Akiva's dictum is the most famous of all Rabbinic statements on the question of free will. Because its language is so terse and assuming, it is subject to a wide range of interpretations. Ever since Maimonides' interpretation, Akiva's statement has been understood to treat the contradiction between God's omniscience and free will.⁸⁰ Others thought it was not a solution of the difficulty, but the postulation of two principles of faith and the duty to maintain them together.

Akiva's dictum does not seek to resolve, nor even to present the problem of the contradiction between God's foreknowledge and human freedom of choice, but to underscore the latter.⁸¹ It is written in such a "succinct and lapidary style" that Urbach believes it may indicate that it is not an individual's expression of opinion, but the final crystallization of a belief endorsed by generations of scholars.⁸² Guttman agrees that Akiva's

⁷⁸ Ibid, 99, note 13.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 100, note 14.

⁸⁰ Ephraim Urbach, *The Sages* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975), 257.

⁸¹ Ibid, 260.

statement is a summation of the view prevailing in the circle of the Sages up to his time, but that it also, simultaneously, marks a new conception. Urbach suggests that by Akiva's time, there was a discernible way of defining the relationship between providence and free choice, namely "the complete separation between humankind's religion-ethical conduct and its external life and its circumstances."⁸³ At the very least, Akiva's dictum shows how the generations of Rabbis held fast to both ends of the free will dilemma.⁸⁴

It is known that the Amoraim used the word *tzafah*, which is usually translated as "foreseen," to mean "seeing the future." However, Urbach convincingly shows that the verb *tzafah* also means "to watch, keep watch" in the Tanaitic period. To add to the mystery of Akiva's position, Avot de R. Nathan 1:39 attributes the following statement to Akiva: "All is seen, all is revealed, and all is according to the intention of a man."

Again, it is safe to deduce that Akiva did not set out to resolve the contradiction between God's foreknowledge and human free will, but to make us realize our responsibility for our actions.⁸⁵ This responsibility is grounded in two factors: in the permission given to humankind to choose our own ways in the world, and in the realization that we are destined to account for our actions before The One who sees and examines our ways.⁸⁶ Akiva did, however, sever the previously established connection between the length of an individual's life and his actions. He believed that one's behavior in this world was not rewarded or punished in this world. The evidence of

⁸² Ibid, 259.

⁸³ Ibid, 268.

⁸⁴ Julius Guttman, *Philosophies of Judaism* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 38.

⁸⁵ Ephraim Urbach, *The Sages* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975), 257.

⁸⁶ D.A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 102, note 23.

Akiva's violent death led Rav to make the final break from any such previously held beliefs.⁸⁷

The early Pharisees taught that human freedom doesn't stand in juxtaposition to God's prescience, as if humanity were separated from God. In a world governed by God, freedom of choice is simply one part of the providential order.⁸⁸ Samuel Cohon concludes, "Divine foreknowledge and human freedom are equally real and true, although human wisdom could not intellectually reconcile them. Akiva spoke for the practical needs of the religious and ethical consciousness of man, not for the theoretical satisfaction of the inquiring mind."⁸⁹

Rabbi Chanina's Maxim: *"Everything is in the hands of heaven, except the fear of heaven"* (Berachot 33b).

The Rabbis fully recognized the difficulty of reconciling human freedom with God's omniscience, but they did not resolve it.⁹⁰ The Rabbis stressed human responsibility in this and related Talmudic passages.⁹¹ This maxim, attributed to Rabbi Chaninah, has its difficulties. Schechter is disappointed with the limitations of this teaching. It seems that all God does is warn that we are watched and that we must be responsible for our choice.⁹²

Rashi interprets the "everything" in Rabbi Chaninah's statement to mean, all the details of one's material make-up – "if a person is to be tall or

⁸⁷ Ephraim Urbach, *The Sages* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975), 270.

⁸⁸ Samuel Cohon, *Man and His Destiny* (Cincinnati: lecture notes, 1954), v.1, p.37, note 32-33.

⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 38, note 33.

⁹⁰ Julius Guttman, *Philosophies of Judaism* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 38.

⁹¹ e.g. Megillah 25a, Niddah 16b, and Tanchuma, Pekude 3.

⁹² Solomon Schechter, *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1993),

short, poor or rich, smart or ignorant, white or black." Furthermore, he understands "is in the hands of heaven" to mean "these are decreed beforehand (i.e. before one's birth) from heaven " And "except the fear of heaven" Rashi explains to say "except the choice of whether to be righteous or evil, since the Almighty has given such a choice over to man himself, by giving him two options, so he can choose the path of the fear of heaven." Everything of one's material make-up may be predetermined by God, but the critical moral make-up of every human being is left to the individual to decide. Rashi quotes Deuteronomy 10:12 as his proof-text. God sets out the two paths of life and death, blessing and curse. Of course, God hopes that every person will choose the path of life and blessing by living according to God's will, but the choice is fully the choice of the individual.

The Jewish Philosophers of the Middle Ages

Hundreds of volumes are filled with the study of free will according to the Jewish philosophers of the Middle Ages. This limited work cannot do the subject justice. However, it is important at least to mention the thought that sprung directly from the works of the Rabbis. The medieval Jewish philosophers inherited the treasures of wisdom from the Rabbis. Just as significant was what they borrowed from their contemporaries. These philosophers were stimulated by the ideological controversies in Christianity and the divisions that arose in Islam over the problem of free will. It is thought that the term *hashgachah* was first coined by Samuel ibn Tibbon as a translation of the Arabic word for providence.⁹³

Saadia Gaon (d. 942) observed the work of Muslim philosophers, who systematically argued over predestination. In treatise 5 of his *Emunot*

⁹³ "Providence," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 13(1971): 1282.

v' De'ot, Saadia was the first Jewish thinker to wrestle with the problem of free will in a philosophically sound way.⁹⁴ He was the first of the many medieval Jewish philosophers, who, almost without exception, maintained the freedom of the human will.⁹⁵

The most often quoted of these thinkers, however, is Maimonides, who taught in his *Guide for the Perplexed*, that free will, the freedom to choose between good and evil, is the only thing which distinguishes human beings from the animals⁹⁶. He believed that everything is left to human choice, even though there are places in the Bible which imply differently.⁹⁷ Many of the problematic biblical passages which Maimonides tackled will be discussed in detail throughout the following chapters.

Conclusion: The Boundaries of Free will and Providence

The Rabbis taught that we need God's involvement to reach our goal. Judaism's God is a Thou-God, concerned about humanity. And because God is concerned for the world, there must be divine forgiveness and a demand for justice. God is, therefore, an active agent in the world,⁹⁸ who challenges humankind, rather than simply creating a perfect world for us. All the mainstream forms of Judaism throughout the ages claim that God provides the impetus for human activity.

The Rabbis also taught that God needs humankind's involvement to reach His goals. We are responsible for God's fate in the world. Through our

⁹⁴ Samuel Cohon, *Man and His Destiny* (Cincinnati: lecture notes, 1954), v.1, p.39, note 40.

⁹⁵ George Foot Moore, *Judaism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927), 454.

⁹⁶ Naftali Hoffner, *Our Life's Aim* (Tel Aviv: Mosad Eliezer Hoffner, 1978), 22.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 23-24.

⁹⁸ Manfred Vogel, *A Quest for a Theology of Judaism* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1987), 42-43.

acts during our limited lifetimes, we can influence the destiny of the universe. "Man's heroism adds strength to God."⁹⁹ According to the original intention of the creation of human beings, we are to be God's helpers. As Henry Slonimsky writes, "To ask whether God cannot redeem the world without man's help, or whether God has need of man for His work, can lead only to quibbling. In history we see that God waits for man. It is clear, then, that God has willed to use man for the completion of his work of creation and to allow him autonomy in that work."¹⁰⁰

The tenet of divine providence in Judaism comes to signify that God is "running the show," that God has absolute sovereignty over history.¹⁰¹ Therefore, the tradition constantly presses against the parameters of the tenet of divine providence, expanding it in various directions. Divine providence is stretched from controlling the realm of history only to incorporating the natural realm as well. God's rule over the human domain is expanded to include control over the inanimate and unconscious domain, too. For example, when a gazelle casts its seed from a mountaintop, God sends "an eagle to catch it in its wings and place it before her and were it to come a moment earlier or a moment later (the offspring) would die at once."¹⁰²

Similarly, universalists expand divine providence from controlling Israel's history in particular to controlling all of history. In response to the destruction of the first Temple and the Babylonian exile in 587 B.C.E., the Rabbis expanded the boundaries of divine providence from controlling collectivities of peoples to controlling individuals as well. The loss of

⁹⁹ Henry Slonimsky, *Essays* (Chicago: HUC Press and Quadrangle Books, 1967), 52.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Manfred Vogel, *A Quest for a Theology of Judaism* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1987), 46.

¹⁰² Bava Batra 16a-b. Similar theme found in Shabbat 77b and 107b, and Genesis Rabbah 5:7.

statehood and sovereignty caused this shift. God's rule over the individual becomes central to the thinking of a diaspora-Judaism,¹⁰³ As the feeling of responsibility and the frequency with which humanity is judged grew, so did the power of fate diminish, and humankind's mastery and its sense of freedom and the possibilities of its influence over his destiny increase."¹⁰⁴

These trends of thought were steered both by the Rabbis and the uneducated as they responded to the political and natural realities of their day. It is understandable that when a people governs itself or when their food supply is sufficient it will claim more responsibility for its own destiny. On the other hand, when a people is oppressed by foreign governments or natural disasters, it becomes self-doubting and feels limited. The people that suffers is more likely to say, "It was meant to be" or "There must be some external, far-reaching reason for this." When a people feels "out of control," it responds with a belief in limited human control, and unending divine power. The following chapters will attempt to draw out such patterns of thought from the rabbinic period in Judaism.

¹⁰³ Manfred Vogel, *A Quest for a Theology of Judaism* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1987), 47.

¹⁰⁴ Ephraim Urbach, *The Sages* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975), 282.

Chapter Two -- Free Will and the Nature of Humankind

The creation stories and the Garden of Eden story of Genesis cry out for discussions of free will and divine providence. Hundreds of midrashim use these texts to debate human nature, what God wants from us, and how one relates to the other. Genesis 2:16, for example, is one of the most charged verses of the Hebrew Bible: "And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, 'Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat; but as for the tree of knowledge of good and evil, you must not eat of it; for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die.'" The reader is forced to consider such issues as the function of commandments, the extent of human freedom, the content of knowledge of good and evil, and the possibility of human immortality.

The Rabbis explore these issues and more, as they add another layer of thought to the original text. Their methodology is often systematic. They record their comments chapter by chapter or according to theme. Their philosophies, however, are never systematic. As chapter one introduces, the Rabbis' thoughts on free will and divine providence are scattered and hidden throughout the literature. The first three chapters of Genesis, however, are central to their understanding of divine and human nature and the destiny that they share. These biblical stories act as the reference point for all the commentaries on this subject that follow.

The Nature of Humankind: *"And God created man in His image"*

(Genesis 1:27).

Before we can discuss how the Rabbis explore the limits of human freedom, we must first discuss how they understood human nature. Before

we can study how the Rabbis explore the extent of God's providence over human beings, we must first uncover how they see His motivation for creating human beings in the first place. Although some Rabbis of this period warn against imagining the details of creation, most apply their minds to exploring its curiosities.

It is taught that God created and destroyed many other worlds before He created this one, was finally satisfied, and called it "very good."¹ When it came time to create humankind, however, God received many warnings. Perhaps motivated by jealousy,² the angels banded together to convince God that humankind would bring nothing but trouble to the world.³ God never denied the human potential for evil. In fact, He foresaw all the future deeds of the righteous and the wicked.⁴ But He weighed them out on scales of justice and mercy,⁵ decided the deeds of the righteous were worthy, and created humankind. Others suggest that the process was less controlled. Only after Adam was created and sinned did God see the wicked ways of future generations and by then it was too late to turn back.⁶

Man was formed from the dust of the earth, but was only brought to life by God's breath.⁷ How is man simultaneously limited like the matter of which he is made and limitless like the God in whose image he is created?⁸ Rabbi Simeon ben Chalafta teaches that human beings are made up of equal

¹ Genesis Rabbah 3:7 and Ecclesiastes Rabbah 3:11.

² Genesis Rabbah 21:1, Pirke deRabi Eliezer 13.

³ Sanhedrin 38b, Genesis Rabbah 8:4 -5.

⁴ Genesis Rabbah 3:8, 4:6, 8:4, 9:5, Pesikta Rabbati 40:2.

⁵ Genesis Rabbah 8:4, Pesikta Rabbati 40:2.

⁶ Pesikta Rabbati 23:6.

⁷ Genesis 2:7.

⁸ Pirke deRabi Eliezer 11, Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:3.

amounts of earthly and heavenly materials. He explains that God chose the equal proportions of His materials very carefully, in order to keep peace in the universe. If either the upper or the lower world could make claims on humankind, the order of the universe would be threatened.⁹ The following midrashim show that because of this cosmic balance of powers, the human sense of self was threatened. Adam and Eve did not know if they were to rule or only be ruled, know or only be known, create or only be created. The rabbis observed that most human beings struggle with the two aspects of their make-up.

Genesis Rabbah teaches that God also debated whether to create man like the angels or like the beasts. He wondered, "If I create him like the celestial beings, he will live forever and not die, but if I create him like the terrestrial beings, he will die and not live (in a future life)." God determined that human beings would possess attributes of both the angels and the beasts. Like the higher beings, men and women can stand upright, speak, understand, and see. Like the lower beings, they can eat and drink, procreate, excrete, and die. Because human beings are made up of both upper and lower elements, if one sins he will die, while if he does not sin, he will live.¹⁰

However, some of the divine attributes which humans possessed originally were taken away or diminished after Adam and Eve rejected God's command. For example, God designed humans with the ability to fly (word play on *hetisan* and *hesitan*). But these privileges were taken away when Adam and Eve conformed to the wishes of the serpent over the wishes of the Holy One, blessed be He.¹¹ Others suggest that six things were taken away

⁹ Genesis Rabbah 12:8, Leviticus Rabbah 9:9.

¹⁰ Genesis Rabbah 8:11, 14:3.

¹¹ Leviticus Rabbah 11:1.

from Adam and they will only return after the coming of the messiah. They were his luster, stature, immortality, fertility, his position in the garden, and the more brilliant light of the sun and moon.¹²

The Rabbis seem to have a love-hate relationship with Adam. Some midrashim call him a saint, while others accuse him of demon-worship.¹³ Some believe Adam to have been lazy,¹⁴ impatient,¹⁵ and vain. Still others say it was envy, cupidity, and ambition which drove Adam out of the world.¹⁶ Whether or not he was worthy of such insults, the negative results of his actions cannot be disputed. Adam blatantly disregarded the one commandment that God placed upon him, and the result was no less than the death of every generation through to the messianic age.

Eve, too, is accused of having exhibited many unappealing traits by a number of related midrashim. Like all women, Eve is said to have been "greedy, inquisitive, envious, and indolent." God hoped to avoid these negative characteristics when creating her, by forming her out of a "neutral" part Adam's body. However, the Rabbis claim that despite God's efforts, Eve and even the most righteous women of Israel were still haughty, eavesdropping, talkative, thieving gadabouts.¹⁷ Such accusations imply that Eve was motivated by her will to act as she did in the garden. Thereby the Rabbis who offer these interpretations, speak in favor of the theory of free will over divine providence.

¹² Genesis Rabbah 7:6 and 12:6, Tanchuma Yelamdenu, Bereshit 6, Pesikta Rabbati 23:6.

¹³ Eruvin 18a, Sanhedrin 38b.

¹⁴ Genesis Rabbah 21:2.

¹⁵ Genesis Rabbah 21:7, Exodus Rabbah 32:1.

¹⁶ Avot deRabi Natan a1 and b1, Sanhedrin 59b, Pirke deRabi Eliezer 13.

¹⁷ Genesis Rabbah 45:5, Deuteronomy Rabbah 6:10/11, Tanchuma Yelamdenu, Vayeshev 6.

Despite these insults, we can assume that the Rabbis often held their tongues, because to insult the creation is to insult the Creator. Rabbi Isaac ben Marion teaches that the Creator is a skillful artist. "God created them and praised them (as His handiwork)..., so who would dare to defame them! They are beautiful and worthy of praise."¹⁸ It is this conflict that is always in the back of the Rabbis' minds and therefore forces us to read between the lines of the Rabbis' commentaries, to read what they do not say as well as what they do say.

The Rabbis recognize both the divine and earthly attributes that make up human nature. They call them *Yetzer Hatov* and *Yetzer Hara*, "the good and evil inclinations. The Rabbis ask why *vayitzer* – "and He formed" – is written with two *yods*.¹⁹ Rabbi Simeon ben Pazzi teaches that the extra *yod* allows the word *y'tzeri*, "my inclination," to be read. Adam cried out, "Woe to me on account of my evil inclination!"²⁰

In contrast, some rabbinic minds highlight the benefits of the evil inclination. They suggest that "Behold, it was very good"²¹ refers to both the good and evil inclinations. For without the evil inclination, no one would build a house, marry or have children.²² They suggest that God claims responsibility for both human drives. A parable is placed in the mouth of God. He says,

There was a little city with few people in it. A great king came and built great siege works against it. Now there was found in it a person who was poor, willing, and wise. He

¹⁸ Ecclesiastes Rabbah 2:12:1.

¹⁹ Genesis 2:7.

²⁰ Eruvin 18a.

²¹ Genesis 1:3.

²² Genesis Rabbah 9:7, Ecclesiastes Rabbah 3:2:3.

delivered the city by his wisdom, but no one thought about that poor person.²³

The little city is the human body. The few residents are the body parts. The great king is the evil drive, who uses siege works of sins against the body. The good inclination is the poor, willing, and wise person, who brings a person to life. "But no one thought about that poor person:" this is the generation of the flood who did not accept the good drive for themselves.

These debates over the nature of humankind mirror the debates over free will and divine providence. If human beings possess divine attributes and powers, we can easily assume that they can act as free agents, capable of making choices that determine their own behavior. On the other hand, if human beings share some characteristics with the dirt, we can easily deduce that they exist only to be manipulated and shaped by others. The complex relationship between these two elements is what provides the Rabbis with so much to talk about.

Wisdom: *"When the woman saw that the tree was...desirable as a source of wisdom, she took of its fruit and ate" (Genesis 3:6).*

Part of human nature is the need to pursue knowledge. However, in the Garden of Eden story, Adam was forbidden from eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.²⁴ Only one midrash claims that Adam and/or Eve were void of understanding.²⁵ As one midrash states: Wisdom personified sent angels to her servants, Adam and Eve, instructing them to partake of **all** that was prepared for them in the garden, including the tree

²³ Tanchuma Buber, Bereshit 38.

²⁴ Genesis 2:17.

²⁵ Genesis Rabbah 21:2.

which was "desirable as a source of wisdom."²⁶ According to this interpretation, it was the pursuit of wisdom which drove Adam and Eve to take the risk and break God's commandment.

When Adam was unique in the world, he was indeed upright and like the angels. "However, when he became two²⁷ then they sought out many inventions."²⁸ Rabbi Berechiah in the name of Rabbi Chanan teaches that as long as there was only Adam, he was one, wholehearted in his obedience to God, but as soon as his rib was taken to create Eve, "he was enabled to know good and evil."²⁹

The Rabbis debate whether or not the wisdom Adam and Eve gained by eating the forbidden fruit was worth all of the suffering that it caused. Considering the Rabbis' life-long pursuit of wisdom, it is surprising that they warn, "All the time that a man increases wisdom he increases anger against himself, and all the time that he increases knowledge he increases suffering."³⁰ It is also surprising that Adam is not listed among the biblical characters who increased wisdom to their advantage nor those who increased wisdom to their disadvantage.³¹ His absence from those lists speaks to the controversial nature of this story and perhaps to the Rabbis' discomfort with Adam's complex character.

Three things are said about the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. It was good to eat, it was beautiful, and it added wisdom.³² However, according

²⁶ Leviticus Rabbah 11:1, quoting Genesis 3:6.

²⁷ i.e. when Eve was created.

²⁸ Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:28:1.

²⁹ Genesis Rabbah 21:5.

³⁰ Genesis Rabbah 19:1, Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:18:1.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Genesis Rabbah 19:5 and 65:13, Ecclesiastes Rabbah 5:10:1.

to the following midrash, Adam possessed wisdom even before he ate from the Tree of Knowledge. When the angels questioned God's desire to create humankind, insisting that they themselves were sufficient beings, God asked them to name the animals. The angels stood up and tried, but failed. Then Adam stood up and wisely gave a name interpretive of the nature of each animal. He even named God wisely. Because of this, the Rabbis pay Adam their highest compliment when they answer it is he who is described by Ecclesiastes 8:1: "Who is wise? and who knows the interpretation of a thing? A man's wisdom makes his face shine, and the strength of his face is changed."³³

Others teach that God was disappointed with Adam's choosing a life of wisdom outside of the garden over a life of ignorance inside the garden. However, God still ensured that Adam's pursuit of wisdom would be productive. When the sun set at the end of the first Sabbath and darkness ensued, Adam was terrified that the serpent would come out to attack him and Eve. So God enabled him to find two flints. God inspired Adam with a kind of knowledge similar to divine knowledge. Adam rubbed the rocks together to make light and he offered a blessing over it.³⁴

All wisdom empowers an individual to make choices and act independently. Wisdom as a God-given attribute implies that free will is what God wants for humankind. No midrashim were found to show that God preferred Adam as a lifeless, thoughtless golem. The breath that God breathed into Adam was, at least in part, inspiration to pursue God-like knowledge and creativity.

³³ Pesikta deRav Kahana 4:3-4, Numbers Rabbah 19:3, Pirke deRabi Eliezer 13, Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:20:1, Pesikta Rabbati 14:9-11.

³⁴ Pesachim 54a, Genesis Rabbah 7:6 and 12:6, variation found in Pirke deRabi Eliezer 20.

Who is to blame?: *"Did you eat of the tree from which I had forbidden you to eat?" (Genesis 3:11).*

Many midrashim attempt to explain the problematic verses in which God seems to have consulted another about the creation of humankind.³⁵ Some teach that God created the world in general and humankind in particular collaboratively with the souls of the righteous.³⁶ Some teach that the other was God's court of angels. However, Rabbi Akiva speaks against Rabbi Papias and all those who look for such a simple answer. He says, "That is enough, Papias. 'Like one of us' does not mean like one of the ministering angels. It only means that God put before him (i.e. Adam) two ways -- the way of life and the way of death. And he chose for himself the way of death."³⁷ A parallel midrash speaks strongly in favor of free will when it adds "and rejected the way of life."³⁸

The following interpretation is the only account in which Adam himself claims full responsibility for his actions. It is a very strong statement in favor of free will, and it is, therefore, not surprising that the authors prefer to soften their message by a parable. Despite its clear stand and memorable metaphor, it is not repeated in any of the collections of midrash which follow it. According to Pesikta deRav Kahana, God wondered why His children abandoned His ways. He referred to Jeremiah 2:15 when He asked, "My children, your fathers found no iniquity in Me, but you found iniquity in Me?" Even Adam did not blame God for the way things transpired in the

³⁵ Genesis 1:26 and 3:22.

³⁶ Genesis Rabbah 8:7, Ruth Rabbah 2:3.

³⁷ Mechilta deRabi Ishmael, Beshalach 7, Genesis Rabbah 21:5.

³⁸ Song of Songs Rabbah 1:9:2.

garden. Adam is compared to a sick man. The doctor came and instructed the sick man to eat certain foods and to avoid certain other foods. But the man did not follow the doctor's orders. His children gathered around his deathbed and asked, "Would you say that the physician used bad judgment in his treatment of you?" The man replied, "Certainly not. I am the one who brought death upon myself. The physician gave me specific instructions, but when I disregarded them, I brought death upon myself." Likewise, when Adam's descendants asked if God's judgment of him was too severe or false, Adam explained that he was given specific instructions,³⁹ which he chose to disregard and thereby brought death upon himself.⁴⁰ The singularity of this midrash is worth noting. If the Rabbis had wanted to make the argument for free will as clear as possible, they would have more frequently put such words into the mouth of Adam, the seeming victim. Perhaps taking such a bold position was considered to be too risky, even heretical.

The following midrashim have another answer for who is to blame for Adam and Eve's actions. For the purpose of this study, it does not matter who is to blame, but only who is responsible. Adam pointed his finger at Eve. Eve pointed her finger at the serpent. The serpent pointed its finger at Samael. All of these accusations indicate that the sin in the garden was ultimately considered to have been act of free will. When the midrashim turn to point a finger at God, then it is considered to have been determined by God.

Here in two collections of midrash from the middle rabbinic period, Adam is shown to have taken the traditional position that God is ultimately responsible for everything. However, God Himself refuted Adam's futile

³⁹ Genesis 2:17.

⁴⁰ Pesikta deRav Kahana 14:5.

attempt to deny the free will that is his, for better or worse. When God announced the punishment of mortality, like a child, Adam grasped for an excuse. He cried, "When I was alone I didn't sin against You. But the woman whom You brought to me enticed me away from Your ways."⁴¹ According to this commentary, only because of his poor attempt to blame God for fating the course of events, did God take away Adam's radiance and banish him from the garden.⁴²

Deuteronomy Rabbah shows that Adam tried to convince God that Eve was to blame. There is a parable of a king who told his servant not to taste any food until he returned from his bath. The servant's wife, however, advised him to taste the food, so that the king would not need to add salt or sauce to it. So he did. The king returned to find the servant still smacking his lips. He demanded, "Didn't I forbid you to eat?" The servant said, "Sire, your maidservant gave it to me," to which the king replied, "And you listen to my maidservant over me?" Likewise Adam tried to deflect the blame onto Eve. God asked, "You listen to Eve rather than Me?" and Adam was immediately driven out of the garden.⁴³

Some of the Rabbis want to blame Eve as well. She did not hear God's command directly. She represents the one who does not trust the chain of transmission of God's word. According to this midrash, however, once she chose to sin, she was motivated by jealousy and fear. And she was determined to take Adam down with her. When Eve went and touched the tree,⁴⁴ she saw the angel of death coming towards her. She cried out, "Woe is

⁴¹ refers to Genesis 3:12.

⁴² Pesikta deRav Kahana 4:4, Pirke deRabi Eliezer 14.

⁴³ Deuteronomy Rabbah 4:5.

⁴⁴ Genesis Rabbah 19:3 teaches that the serpent actually pushed Eve against the tree.

me! I will now die, and the Holy One blessed be He will make another woman and give her to Adam. Behold, I will cause him to eat with me; if we shall die, we shall both die. And if we shall live, we shall both live." So she took the fruits of the tree and ate and gave some to Adam as well. After he ate he saw that he was naked, his eyes were opened and his teeth were set on edge. The innocent Adam was dumbfounded and asked, "What is all this?"⁴⁵

In Avot deRabi Natan, Eve is presented as one who took the initiative to disobey the instruction of Adam, and consequently of God. A parable is told of a man who told his wife, "Everything in this house is at your disposal, except for this cask." In it were figs, nuts, and the scorpion he placed on top. As soon as he left the house, she opened the cask and was bitten by the scorpion... Although she was dying, the husband threw her out of the house.⁴⁶

A related parable twists the story somewhat so that it was the serpent who instigated Eve's behavior. A certain woman went to the wife of a snake-charmer to borrow some vinegar. She asked, "How does your husband treat you?" "With every kindness, except he does not permit me to approach this cask which is full of serpents and scorpions." The visitor said, "No, the cask contains all his finery. He wishes to marry another woman and give it to her." The wife immediately inserted her hand and was bitten.⁴⁷ The husband is Adam. The wife is Eve. And the woman requesting vinegar is the serpent.

Pirke deRabi Eliezer teaches that God turned to Eve and asked, "Wasn't it enough for you that you sinned yourself? But also that you should make

⁴⁵ Pirke deRabi Eliezer 13, similar themes are found in Genesis Rabbah 19:4-5.

⁴⁶ Avot deRabi Natan 17b(1-2).

⁴⁷ Genesis Rabbah 19:10 and a variation is found in Pirke deRabi Eliezer 13.

Adam sin?" She answered, "The serpent enticed my mind to sin before You." So God sent Samael to curse all three of them with nine curses. The earth was also blamed and cursed because it did not speak out against the evil deed.⁴⁸

Another midrash stands alone as it surprisingly depicts God in a moment of weakness and jealousy. God said to Adam, "How far have you fallen? Yesterday you were ruled by My will and now by the will of the serpent."⁴⁹ However, the easiest target for placing blame is the non-human, but shrewd serpent. It is accused of having been an unbeliever and of having deprived the world of much goodness.⁵⁰ It is taught in Rabbi Meir's name, "According to the greatness of the serpent, so was his downfall."⁵¹ Because it was so wise, its punishment was severe. The sin of the garden was one of four sins that began with the word *af* and ended in destruction by the word *af*, meaning God's "wrath."⁵² The serpent said to the woman, "Yea (*Af*), did God say, 'You shall not eat of any tree of the garden'?"⁵³

In some of the earliest midrashim, the serpent is shown to have been jealous of Adam and therefore crafted his downfall. Rabbi Judah ben Tema teaches that the serpent was envious because Adam used to recline in the Garden of Eden, while the ministering angels roasted flesh and cooled⁵⁴ wine for him.⁵⁵ Rabbi Joshua ben Karchah teaches that when the serpent watched

⁴⁸ Pirke deRabbi Eliezer 14.

⁴⁹ Genesis Rabbah 19:9.

⁵⁰ Genesis Rabbah 19:1.

⁵¹ Ibid, Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:18:1.

⁵² Esther Rabbah 9:3.

⁵³ Genesis 3:1.

⁵⁴ other: "strained."

⁵⁵ Avot deRabbi Nathan 17a(1), Sanhedrin 59b.

Adam and Eve copulating, it became passionate for her.⁵⁶ He wanted to marry Eve and be king of the world, walk erect, and eat dainties.⁵⁷

Whatever the motivation, all of the midrashim agree that the serpent was determined to get Adam out of the picture. It deduces that it could not go to Adam directly, because he would not listen. So it planned to get to Adam through Eve, who would listen because she is a woman. The serpent seduced her with the idea that once she eats from the tree she would be able to create and destroy life and entire worlds as well. It spoke slander against God, saying that He wanted to eliminate the competition of other craftsmen, and therefore He forbade them from eating of the tree. R. Judah ben R. Simon teaches that the serpent rationalized, "Whatever was created after its companion, dominates it...Now you were created after everything in order to rule over everything. Make haste! Eat before He creates other worlds which will rule over you."⁵⁸

The serpent made a liar of Adam – who added the warning against touching the tree -- by touching the tree and surviving. The serpent actually shook the tree with its hands and feet until the fruit fell off and then it ate and still survived.⁵⁹ Perhaps this midrash comes to teach that animals also possess free will, but are not bound by commandments as humans are.

The serpent could have saved itself by arguing, "When the words of the teacher and the pupil (are contradictory), whose words should be hearkened to – surely the teacher's." Even though Eve was seduced by the words of the serpent, she should have obeyed God's command. But the

⁵⁶ Genesis Rabbah 18:6 and 85:2.

⁵⁷ Avot deRabi Natan 17b(1).

⁵⁸ Genesis Rabbah 19:4.

⁵⁹ Avot deRabi Natan 17a(1).

serpent did not even try to justify its actions. Therefore, neither did God plead on its behalf.⁶⁰

Some of the Rabbis are so reluctant to believe that Adam HaRishon would bring his own downfall by his own free will, that they go so far as to blame the tree, an inanimate object, for Adam's sin. These are attempts to prove the unlimited extent of divine providence. "All trees were created for man's hurt."⁶¹ Rabbi Simeon bar Yochai explains that it was the fig leaf which brought death to the world.⁶² Many midrashim try to determine what type of tree it was.⁶³ They suggest it was a grapevine, because it brought bitterness to the world. It was a fig tree, one of the seven species, because it brought seven days of mourning, lamentation, and weeping to the world and death was decreed on its account.⁶⁴

Those who defend the tree, defend the idea of free will. Rabbi Azariah and Rabbi Judah ben Rabbi Simon warn in the name of Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, "God forbid we should try to guess what kind of tree it was! The Holy One, blessed be He, did not and will not reveal to man what the tree was, so that it might not be said, 'Through this tree **Adam** brought death into the world'."⁶⁵ Some suggest that the tree even spoke out to warn Eve not to touch it.

Everyone— from the most earthly being, the tree, to the most heavenly being -- everyone is considered a suspect. Throughout rabbinic literature the

⁶⁰ Sanhedrin 29a.

⁶¹ Genesis Rabbah 13:1.

⁶² Genesis Rabbah 19:6.

⁶³ Sanhedrin 70a, Berachot 40a, Genesis Rabbah 15:7, 19:5, Pesikta deRab Kahana 20:6, Numbers Rabbah 10:2.

⁶⁴ Genesis Rabbah 15:7, Pesikta deRav Kahana 20:6.

⁶⁵ Ibid and ibid.

angels are depicted as somewhat envious of the special relationship between God and human beings. The midrashim surrounding the Garden of Eden story are no exceptions. "The angels came to destroy Adam, so God blessed him and took him under His wings."⁶⁶ The angels retreated from God and said to themselves, "If we do not take counsel against this man so that he sins before his Creator, we cannot prevail against him." So Samael and his band descended and selected the serpent as the most evil of all the creatures. Samael mounted the serpent and rode it like a camel. From then on, the serpent acted and spoke only with the *yetzer* of Samael.⁶⁷

There is a circle of midrashim which uphold the belief in divine providence at the risk of describing God as jealous, scared, and even crooked. They suggest that God created Adam to appear like Him in stature and glory.⁶⁸ But when the angels mistook him for a god, The Holy One felt threatened.⁶⁹ Similarly, God feared that the animals would mistake Adam for their Creator, so He formed Eve to prove that only God is unique in the world. There was another like Adam.

A well-known rabbinic explanation for why bad things happen to good people is that God tests the righteous in order to make examples of their strength of character. It is suggested⁷⁰ that God knocked on four flasks, only to find them chamber-pots. God questioned four biblical figures -- Adam, Cain, Balaam, and Hezekiah -- only to find them wanting. God challenged Adam by asking, "Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat of the tree

⁶⁶ Avot deRabi Natan 18a(1).

⁶⁷ Pirke deRabi Eliezer 13.

⁶⁸ Tanchuma Yelamdenu, Vayakhel 3.

⁶⁹ Genesis Rabbah 8:10.

⁷⁰ Genesis Rabbah 19:11.

from which I had forbidden you to eat?"⁷¹ And the man said, "The woman You put at my side – she gave me of the tree, and I ate."⁷² Adam denied his ability to choose freely. In hopes to deflect the blame from himself to Eve, and therefore to God, he made himself seem powerless. However, God would have preferred a strong flask that would admit to its transgression and offer repentance.

Divine Providence in Midrashim on Genesis, Chapters 1-3:

"What is this you have done?!" (Genesis 3:13).

Both the beliefs of free will and divine predestination are articulated throughout the rabbinic period. However, the Tanaitic and early Amoraic periods tend to give more voice to free will, while the middle Amoraic period puts a greater emphasis on the possibility that much of life is predetermined. The Tanaitic and early Amoraic periods produce only a small handful of midrashim that draw examples of divine providence from the first three chapters of Genesis. There are a few that bear noting, but they are rare and seem to present themselves in either an unconvincing or purposely convoluted way.

A series of midrashim record the items which are said to have been created on the eve of the first Sabbath at twilight. Tractate Pesachim lists ten items: the well, the manna, the rainbow, writing, the writing instruments, the Tablets, the sepulcher of Moses, the cave in which Moses and Elijah stood, the opening of the ass's mouth, and the opening of the earth's mouth meant to swallow up the wicked. The text continues by noting that some add Aaron's staff, its almonds and its blossoms. Others add the demons. And still

⁷¹ Genesis 3:11.

⁷² Genesis 3:12.

others include Adam's garments.⁷³ The last item on tractate Pesachim's list implies that before the first man was even created, it was determined that he would eat from the Tree of knowledge of good and evil, his eyes would be opened, he would be ashamed of his nakedness, and would need clothing. The complex series of Adam's actions, intellectual advances, and emotions were all fixed by the Creator before his existence. Similarly, the early creation of the earth's mouth implies that wickedness and the punishment of death were also pre-determined.

Esther Rabbah explains that the word *hayah* is used in connection with a biblical figure in order to indicate that his character was consistent from birth to death.⁷⁴ *Hayah* is used twice in the early chapters of Genesis.

"Behold, the man has become (*hayah*) like one of us"⁷⁵ shows that Adam was predestined to die. And "Now the serpent was (*hayah*) the shrewdest of all the wild beasts"⁷⁶ shows that the serpent was destined for punishment. This midrash is repeated in later collections of midrash.⁷⁷

"To everything there is a time"⁷⁸ is used by an early midrash as the proof text to show that Adam's experiences in the garden were inevitable. The moment of Adam's introduction to the garden as well as the moments of his expulsion from it were set in advance. The midrash does not specify if these events were fixed at the twilight of the first Sabbath or at the creation of the garden.⁷⁹

⁷³ Pesachim 54a.

⁷⁴ Esther Rabbah 4:3.

⁷⁵ Genesis 3:22.

⁷⁶ Genesis 3:1.

⁷⁷ Exodus Rabbah 2:4, Tanchuma Yelamdenu, Shemot 13.

⁷⁸ Ecclesiastes 3:1.

⁷⁹ Pesikta deRav Kahana 12:7, Ecclesiastes Rabbah 3:2:1.

A haunting parable is attributed to Rabbi Chanina bar Papa, one of the early Amoraim. A hunter held a bird behind his back. He asked another to guess whether the bird was alive or dead. The second person answered wisely, "If you wish, it is alive; and if you wish, it is dead." This parable, along with its proof-text from Ezekiel, teaches that human fate literally lies in the hands of God.⁸⁰ God must have willed that Adam eat from the tree, so that his lifetime would be limited. If God had wanted Adam to be immortal, He would not have placed the tree in the garden at all. Rabbi Chanina bar Papa probably believed that God can strike individuals down, like Datan and Aviram, but that more often God causes an individual to "choose" the path that will lead to his death.

Many of the midrashim mentioned above are retold and rerecorded throughout the middle rabbinic period, showing their appeal to later commentators. However, many more aggadot were created to support the theory of divine providence. The voices from 640 - 1000 C.E. are much bolder than their predecessors. One Rabbi puts the message of his sermon into the mouth of an angel who says, "Didn't I tell you that you were formed against your will, that you were born against your will, that you would live against your will, and that ultimately you will have to render an accounting before the Holy One blessed be He, against your will?"⁸¹

Tanchuma Yelamdenu seems certain that the series of events that took place in the garden were fixed in advance by God. It is written there:

The Holy One, blessed be He, introduced death through the serpent, which had been predestined for that purpose, as it is said, "Now the serpent was the shrewdest."⁸² It was foreseen

⁸⁰ Genesis Rabbah 19:11.

⁸¹ Tanchuma Yelamdenu VaYakhel 3.

⁸² Genesis 3:1.

by the Holy One, blessed be He, that Adam would eat the apple and would die because of its subtlety, as it is written: "For on the day that you eat of it, you will die."⁸³ The Holy One, blessed be He, said to her (Eve): This is no mere parable. He was already destined for that end, as it is written: "Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil."⁸⁴

Furthermore, Tanchuma Yelamdenu insists that the word *hen* used in Genesis 3:22 alludes only to death. It quotes "Behold (*hen*), your days approach that you must die"⁸⁵ as a proof-text to again argue that Adam's death was a part of God's plan. On the sixth day of creation, God made human beings, but it is written, "And I will cut off man from off the face of the earth."⁸⁶

God's Omniscience: *"This is the Book of the Generations of Adam"*

(Genesis 5:1).

The theories of free will and divine providence cannot be considered apart from the idea of God's omniscience. Here we will only study the few relevant midrashim written to explain the so-called "Book of the Generations of Adam." The Rabbis of the Tannaitic and early Amoraic periods consider the "book" as a metaphor for God's omniscience. They do not see God's omniscience and humankind's free will to be mutually exclusive. Rabbi Akiva's famous statement, "All is foreseen and free will is forgiven" is not self-contradictory for his time period. However, the majority of relevant midrashim produced in the middle rabbinic period demonstrate that God is omniscient and therefore determines the future of humankind.

⁸³ Genesis 3:3.

⁸⁴ Tanchuma Yelamdenu, Shemot 17 based on Genesis 3:22.

⁸⁵ Deuteronomy 31:14.

⁸⁶ Tanchuma Yelamdenu, Bereshit 8, quoting Zephaniah 1:3.

Resh Lakish inquires about The Book of the Generations of Adam which is mentioned in Genesis 5:1. According to such earlier rabbinic interpretation, Adam did not actually have a book, rather the Holy One blessed be He showed Adam every future expositor, sage, and leader of Israel. Adam rejoiced at the teaching of Rabbi Akiva and grieved about his death.⁸⁷

In contrast, Tanchuma Buber, from the middle rabbinic period, considers The Book of The Generations of Adam to have been an actual book.⁸⁸ Some believe that God simply showed Adam all of the generations to come and put them in his book. Another interpretation is more complex. While Adam was lying as a lifeless golem, God showed him every generation up until the day the messiah arrives. God revealed every generation – its preachers, its righteous, and its wicked. Then God said to Adam, "Whatever your eyes have seen, in your book they were all written down, even the days which were ordained."⁸⁹ Rabbis Eliezer and Joshua disagree about the meaning of "even the days which were ordained." According to Rabbi Eliezer, God specified the days on which He would redeem His children from Egypt, divide the sea, cast down the enemies, and give the Torah. And not one day was changed from what was written. In contrast, Rabbi Joshua, perhaps to counter such a strong statement in favor of divine providence, teaches "even the days which were ordained" to be simply The Day of Atonement, as it is written, "Is not this the fast that I have chosen?"⁹⁰

The following two midrashim are produced by the same school of Rabbis. Both refer to the Book of the Generations of Adam to illustrate their

⁸⁷ Avodah Zarah 5a and Sanhedrin 38b.

⁸⁸ Tanchuma Buber, Bereshit 1:2.

⁸⁹ Genesis 5:1.

⁹⁰ Isaiah 58:6.

points. And yet each one views the eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil very differently. On a basic level, one disapproves of Adam's actions, while the second praises him and the result of his deeds.

First, when God showed the newly created Adam the future righteous and wicked, He scolded him, saying, "Look at how you have brought death upon the righteous."⁹¹ As a result, Adam became depressed. He admitted that he did not care what the wicked thought of him, but he worried that the righteous would speak negatively about him, blaming him for their mortality. So Adam requested that God not record that he was responsible for bringing death into the world. The Holy One struck a compromise. God explained that when someone is about to depart from this world, He would appear to him and instruct him, "Write down the deeds of your life, since you are dying for the deeds which **you** have done." The deeds would be written and signed. Then in the age to come, when God will sit in judgment over every creature, He will refer to all the books of the children of Adam and reveal their deeds to them.⁹²

Then just three passages later, Adam is praised for bringing the righteous into the world. God cast a sleep over Adam and showed him Noah and all the unblemished, Abraham and all the proselytes, Isaac and all who sacrifice burnt offerings, etc. After he had seen all of the righteous yet to be, Adam was awakened and his soul was at rest.⁹³

The debate is over whether or not omniscience dictates providence. The earlier Rabbis tend to teach that it does not, while the Rabbis of the middle period tend to say that it does. However, both periods produce many

⁹¹ Tanchuma Buber, Bereshit 1:29.

⁹² Pesikta Rabbati 8:2.

⁹³ Tanchuma Buber, Bereshit 1:32.

midrashim that are confident in God's omniscience. Pesikta Rabbati offers a clear example. "Although man does whatever he wants, his soul tells the Holy One Blessed be He every single thing" -- whether the deed is done at night, in secret, or in the dark. When God passes judgment, man is astonished and asks, "How did You know? Who told You?" God says, "Fool! She is in you. Whatever your heart thinks, even in its secret chambers, your soul reports to God." Rabbi Acha offers a parable: Like agents who inform the king, so does every soul report every thing to an angel who reports to a cherub who reports to God.⁹⁴

What does God want for us? What does God want from us?

There are many midrashim which emphasize God's benevolence at the risk of hinting that God is somehow limited, even if self-limiting. They teach that God had "intended," "wanted," and "hoped" that Adam would live forever, but because he did not obey God's command, the Holy One blessed be He **had** to take away his immortality as He had warned.⁹⁵ If God determined human life, He would have simply controlled Adam in such a way that His wishes would be met.

One midrash presents and refutes the argument of the skeptic who claims that it was in fact just the opposite. Rather than God having to take away Adam's immortality because Adam disobeyed, God caused Adam to disobey, because He could not make good on His promise of immortality. The Rabbis admit, "This is a difficult idea to grasp." God created Adam as one who was "not meant to know the taste of death." Furthermore, God intended to make Adam ruler over the world, to be set up as king over all the

⁹⁴ Pesikta Rabbati 8:2.

⁹⁵ Genesis Rabbah 21:4-5, Numbers Rabbah 16:24, Pesikta Rabbati 42:8.

creatures. Generations of doubters ask, "Is it possible to believe that had he not sinned, Adam, a mere mortal, would have endured for ever? No, it is not. Therefore, The Holy One blessed be He trumped up the charges against Adam (so as to get out of a promise He could not keep)." The midrash concludes with a refutation of the skeptic's argument by citing Elijah as a mortal who will live eternally.⁹⁶ In the end, the point is made that God may deny Himself the satisfaction of seeing humankind succeed, for the sake of remaining consistent in His system of reward and punishment.

A chain of midrashim depict King David as praising God for ruling with both justice and mercy. Were it not for God's attribute of mercy, Adam would not have endured even one hour, for in that first hour he ate from the tree.⁹⁷ He deserved to die immediately, because he brought death to all future generations, but God showed compassion. The Holy One blessed be He expelled him and allowed him to live nine hundred and thirty years.⁹⁸ Rabbi Judah and Rabbi Yochanan debate with Rabbi Nechemia and Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish over whether God's judgment was severe or lenient.⁹⁹ If Adam's sin was an act of free will, the judgment was lenient. If it was an act determined by God, the judgment was severe.

Tractate Sanhedrin 70a teaches that God wants us to learn from the mistakes which our free will allows. And God wants repentance. God opened wide the gates of repentance for Adam after he ate from the tree, but Adam chose not to enter.¹⁰⁰ According to Rabbi Akiva, the most vocal

⁹⁶ Pesikta Rabbati 48:2.

⁹⁷ Exodus Rabbah 3:21 says three hours. Genesis Rabbah 18:6 says six hours.

⁹⁸ Genesis Rabbah 21:7, and 19:8, Pesikta Rabbati 40:2, Numbers Rabbah 5:4 and 23:13.

⁹⁹ Genesis Rabbah 19:8, 21:7-8.

¹⁰⁰ Genesis Rabbah 21:6.

defender of the theory of free will, God then said, "Behold, Adam has become like one who by himself would choose good or evil even now." God insisted, "Repent! And I'll accept you." However, because Adam's pride was so great, he replied, "No, I will not." Therefore, the Holy Blessed be He brought him low, and drove him out of the garden.¹⁰¹ Numbers Rabbah 8:3 repeats this midrash and adds that as soon as God passed judgment, Adam began to revile and blaspheme. Another suggests that it wasn't until after his son Cain sinned and repented and was pardoned that Adam finally came to learn the power of repentance. He was so angry that he had not realized it sooner, that he slapped himself on the face.¹⁰²

This following midrash, in contrast, presents Adam as the quintessential model of repentance.

On the Sunday after he sinned, Adam went into the waters of the upper Gichon until the waters reached up to his neck, and he fasted seven weeks of seven days, until his body became like a kind of seaweed. Adam said before the Holy One Blessed be He, "Sovereign of all the world! Remove, I pray Thee, my sins from me and accept my repentance, and all the generations will learn that repentance is a reality." God put forth His right hand, and accepted his repentance, and removed his sin away from him. Adam returned and meditated in his heart and said, "I know that death will remove me."¹⁰³

Repentance goes hand in hand with free will. If one believes every deed to be determined by God, why would one repent for his failings? One would expect an apology from God instead. The midrashim which depict an arrogant Adam do not necessarily support the idea of providence. However, those which present a remorseful Adam do imply that those who repent believe in the power of free will.

¹⁰¹ Pesikta Rabbati 7:2.

¹⁰² Pesikta deRav Kahana 24:11, Leviticus Rabbah 5:5.

¹⁰³ Pesikta deRabi Eliezer 20.

Commandment and Consequence: *"You must not eat of it; lest you will die"*

(Genesis 2:17).

Both the theories of free will and determinism are unappealing when taken to their extremes. If human beings are completely detached from God, if God does not care about what we do or what happens to us, we function all alone in the universe. If every human thought, word, and action is fixed by a Dictator-God, we only exist, we do not really live. But the Rabbis desperately want both a relationship with the Divine and a sense of purpose in the world. They are able to fulfill both their needs through a system of commandments, the compromise between human free will and divine providence. The system established by the Torah makes clear what God wants and expects from human beings and simultaneously requires the individual to make the ultimate choice over whether or not to devote himself to do God's will. God commands, human beings either follow or they do not, and God responds accordingly with judgment. Through the covenant of Torah, specific types of both human freedom and divine providence are maintained. The following are a few of the midrashim which spring from the early Genesis stories and elaborate on the complex interplay of free will and providence in terms of commandments.

When the Holy One Blessed be He contemplated fashioning man, He said to the Torah, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness."¹⁰⁴ The Torah tried to warn God by quoting Job 14:1: "'The man You wish to make will be limited in days, and full of trouble' and he will sin. Unless You are willing to be long-suffering with him, it would be better that he should not come into the world." God was insulted and said, "Is it for nothing that I am

¹⁰⁴ Genesis 1:26.

described as 'slow to anger and abounding in loving kindness'¹⁰⁵ "

Immediately thereafter the Creator began to collect the dust of the four corners of the earth to form man.¹⁰⁶

The story of the Garden of Eden and Adam's sin there is often used by the Rabbis as a paradigm for Israel's relationship with God. Just as Adam received a commandment from God, so have the People of Israel received the Torah. Just as God hoped that Adam would keep his one commandment, so does God hope that Israel will observe all six hundred and thirteen of theirs. Just as Adam, with free will, chose to break the commandment, so often does Israel. And finally, just as Adam had to pay the consequences which God painfully allotted to him, so is it for Israel. Humankind has the freedom to uphold God's plan or break from God's plan, but it must always deal with the consequences that follow. Genesis Rabbah teaches that Adam learned this insight into the ways of God's world, when he saw that his descendants were destined for Gehenna. He responded by engaging less in procreation. But when he saw that the twenty-sixth generation would receive the Torah, he applied himself to producing many descendants.¹⁰⁷

Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish taught that the Holy One, blessed be He made a condition with all creation, saying, "If Israel will accept the Torah all will be well, but if not, I will turn the world back to being void and without form."¹⁰⁸ From Genesis 3:24 ("So He drove out the man and He placed...the flaming sword which turned every way to keep the way to the tree of life"), Rabbi Eleazar teaches that the sword and the Torah were given from heaven

¹⁰⁵ Numbers 17:18.

¹⁰⁶ Pirke deRabi Eliezer 11, Tanchuma Yelamdenu, Vayakhel 3.

¹⁰⁷ Genesis Rabbah 21:9.

¹⁰⁸ Avodah Zarah 3a and 5a, Shabbat 88a.

wrapped together. God said to Israel, "If you keep what is written in this Book you will be delivered from the sword, and if not, the latter will ultimately kill you." Rabbi Simeon bar Yochai continued by teaching that the loaf and the rod were given from heaven wrapped together. God said to Israel, "If you observe the Torah, behold you shall have a loaf to eat, but if not, behold the rod will beat you!"¹⁰⁹

Rabbi Simeon bar Yochai tells a similar parable of a king with many sons and slaves. When the sons and slaves did the king's will, he would open storage houses for them and they would eat. But when they did not do his will, the king locked up the food supply and they went hungry. So it is with Israel. When they carry out the will of God, He causes rain to fall. When they do not carry out the will of God, He shuts up the heavens.¹¹⁰

Similarly, Exodus Rabbah depicts The Holy One blessed be He saying,

"If I gave only one commandment to Adam, so that he might fulfill it and I made him equal to the ministering angels, how much more so should those who practice and fulfill all the six hundred and thirteen commandments – not to mention their general principles, details, and minutiae – be deserving of eternal life?"

In this interpretation, Israel inherited eternal life through the gift of Torah, until they failed God by breaking His commandments and worshipping the Golden Calf.¹¹¹

The Rabbis want to know how many commandments were introduced to Adam. This is significant, because if Adam kept one mitzvah and rejected another, free will would be the logical explanation. According to the biblical account, however, only one commandment was given. This, of

¹⁰⁹ Sifrei 40:6-7, Genesis Rabbah 21:9, Leviticus Rabbah 35:6.

¹¹⁰ Sifrei 40:6.

¹¹¹ Exodus Rabbah 32:1.

course, makes it difficult to know definitively how Adam understood the role of a commandment in his relationship with God. However, from the one commandment which is clear in the biblical account, "And the Lord God commanded the man saying, of every tree of the garden you may freely eat,"¹¹² six additional commandments are implied, according to the Rabbis. The six warn against blasphemy, idolatry, murder, adultery, robbery, and speak in favor establishing courts of justice.¹¹³

The Song of Songs Rabbah version is illuminated by a parable of Rabbi Eleazar: A king had a cellar full of wine. He gave one cup of wine to the first guest, another cup of wine to the second. Then when the king's son arrived, he gave him the whole cellar. The first guest is Adam. The second is Noah. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were the last three guests before Israel arrived. Israel received all the commandments, both positive and negative.

Pirke deRabi Eliezer implies that Adam also received the laws of the Sabbath. God kept the Sabbath in the heavens and Adam kept the Sabbath on earth. And he was rightfully rewarded for his obedience. The Sabbath day protected him from evil and comforted him from the doubts in his heart.¹¹⁴ Rabbi Berechia teaches that when Adam realized he may have inadvertently profaned the Sabbath, he composed Psalm 92 – "A Psalm, A Song, For the Sabbath Day."¹¹⁵ The suggestion that Adam was so thorough when considering the commandment of Sabbath observance sheds new light onto his treatment of the commandment about not eating from the tree.

¹¹² Genesis 2:16.

¹¹³ Sanhedrin 56b, Sifrei 111:1:3, Genesis Rabbah 16:4, Pesikta deRav Kahana 12:1, Song of Songs Rabbah 1:2:5, Numbers Rabbah 14:12.

¹¹⁴ Pirke deRabi Eliezer 20.

¹¹⁵ Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:2:1.

Genesis 3:3 informs the reader that when Adam told Eve about God's warning against eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, he expanded the prohibition to also warn against touching the tree. This is the first example of what the Rabbis call "building a fence around the Torah," in order to protect the original commandment from one's evil inclination. This also shows Adam's great care for God's words. Or perhaps it shows Adam's lack of trust in how Eve might make use of her freedom in the garden. However, according to Rabbi Chiyya, Adam built the fence incorrectly by making the fence itself more significant than the principal commandment. This is how the serpent could use Adam's words to its own advantage when seducing Eve to take from the tree.¹¹⁶

The Rabbis debate whether Adam and Eve's response should be considered as "The Original Sin" which led to terrible consequences, or rather as an act of freedom which led to good consequences. It is interesting to note that the comments of the Tana'im and the Early Amoraim emphasize that even when free will allows one to break from God's expectations, there can be a positive result. The Amoraim of the middle rabbinic period, on the other hand, emphasize the negative outcomes which result from breaking God's command.

The following are some examples of earlier midrashim which demonstrate how breaking from God's command can actually benefit the human condition. In Genesis Rabbah 9:5, "And God saw all that He had made, and found it very good"¹¹⁷ refers to death, which is very good (because it is a potent force for repentance). Adam deserved to be spared the experience of death. But it was decreed against him, because the Holy One

¹¹⁶ Sanhedrin 29a, Genesis Rabbah 19:3.

¹¹⁷ Genesis 1:31.

blessed be He foresaw that Nebuchadnezzar and Chiram would declare themselves gods; therefore was death decreed against him. Why didn't God decree death only against the wicked and spare the righteous? Lest the wicked perform fraudulent repentance because of ulterior motives. According to Genesis Rabbah 9:6, "It was very good" refers to suffering, for without it men could not attain a life in the world to come. "It was very good" refers to Gehenna and the Angel of Death, because they motivate individuals to labor conscientiously in the work of living.¹¹⁸

Similarly, Resh Lakish teaches in the Talmud that we should be grateful that our ancestors worshipped the Golden Calf, for had they not sinned we would not have come into the world, because they would not have procreated. The "be fruitful and multiply"¹¹⁹ commandment only applied to those who lived up until Sinai. Another position explains that if our ancestors had not worshipped the Calf we would have come into the world, but they would have become immortal, making it seem as if we don't even exist.¹²⁰

In contrast, the following are examples from later commentators which demonstrate that breaking from God's will can only lead to harm. Adam's commandment¹²¹ is recited as the proof-text when one rabbinic voice asserts that "commanding signifies nothing but admonition in every instance."¹²² No commandment can be fulfilled to perfection, because of the limited nature of human beings. Adam was doomed to fail.

¹¹⁸ Genesis Rabbah 9:9-10 respectively.

¹¹⁹ Genesis 1:28.

¹²⁰ Avodah Zarah 5a.

¹²¹ Genesis 2:16ff.

¹²² Numbers Rabbah 7:7.

Tanchuma Buber, also from the middle period, teaches that God had a plan for Israel's observance and immortality. "If he had heeded and been joined to Me, he would have been like Me. Just as I remain alive, so he would have remained alive forever."¹²³ God told the Angel of Death to rule over all the idolaters, but not to touch Israel. Only forty days after receiving the Torah, however, they "frustrated God's plan" by worshipping the Golden Calf. God said to them,

"I thought you would not sin and would live and endure forever like Me; like the ministering angels, who are immortal. Yet, after all this greatness, you wanted to die! Like Adam whom I charged with one commandment which he was to perform and live and endure forever, yet he corrupted his deeds and nullified My decree. Similarly have you ruined yourselves like Adam and so indeed, you will die like Adam."¹²⁴

More simply put – God commanded Adam and he did not obey. God commanded the Angel of Death and he did obey.¹²⁵ This only further illustrates that God does indeed have a plan for humanity, that every human, as an individual and as part of a collective, has the freedom to choose whether to realize or break from that plan, and that God always responds in judgment.

Similarly, Exodus Rabbah teaches that when Israel accepted the Torah, they benefited and were freed from the Angel of Death. If Israel had not worshipped the Golden Calf, the Angel of Death would still have no power over them nor would they have been sent into exile. But as soon as they worshipped the Calf, death came to them. God said,

"You have followed the course of Adam who did not withstand his trials for more than three hours...Since you

¹²³ Tanchuma Buber, Bereshit 1:21.

¹²⁴ Numbers Rabbah 16:24.

¹²⁵ Pesikta Rabbati 42:8.

have followed the footsteps of Adam, you shall die like men...You have brought your own downfall. Furthermore, where you once were served direct inspiration, now you will be served only by an angel."¹²⁶

"Although man can do whatever he wants," God is always informed and will always pass judgment.¹²⁷ Because God swore never to bring another flood, the wicked said, "We can do whatever we wish without fear of punishment." If it is possible to say, God regretted making such a promise. However, God could still make judgments. He could still drown them in rivers or in cisterns.¹²⁸

When it comes to the institution of commandments, the Rabbis throughout the ages agree that the individual has free will to decide whether or not he will help to realize God's expectations. However, the Rabbis' beliefs about consequences shift over time. The earlier minds can imagine that breaking from God's command could result in a surprising good, while those of the middle period can only see such a break leading to despair.

Partnership: *"The Lord God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden to till it and tend it." (Genesis 2:15)*

The "Commandment and Consequence" section above suggests that according to the Rabbis the human-Divine relationship is established by commandments. Here we will show the purpose of this system. According to the Rabbis this partnership is a means to an end. Both parties agree to the contract when they are dedicated to realizing the shared goal of completing creation.

¹²⁶ Exodus Rabbah 32:1.

¹²⁷ Pesikta Rabbati 8:2.

¹²⁸ Tanchuma Buber, Bereshit 1:36.

Some imagined the garden to have been a paradise in which Adam's every desire was fulfilled for him effortlessly.

God loved Adam with an abounding love. He created him at the site of The Temple and brought him to His palace, the Garden of Eden. One might think God brought Adam there to use him as a worker, but didn't all of the trees grow by themselves without tending? Neither did God use him to water the garden, because didn't a river flow right through it?¹²⁹

"Remember the world was created in the hope that man would not sin; and men can live without sinning because they can subsist if necessary only on grasses and herbs that the earth puts forth."¹³⁰ This difficult passage is explained by Rabbi Joseph B Soloveitchik to mean that it was only after Adam's fall that man was condemned to raise his sustenance by the sweat of his brow, in contrast to before when produce would grow spontaneously from the earth.¹³¹ Rabbi Isaac taught that because Adam and Eve had acted sinfully, they were forced to toil, to take leaves and thread and sew garments for themselves.¹³²

However, most from the rabbinic period believed the ideal Eden to include work and purpose. "Even Adam, the first man, did not taste a morsel until he had done some work. It is first written, 'to till and tend it'¹³³ and only then is it written, 'Of every tree of the garden you may eat freely.'¹³⁴ This idea is expanded further. "Man was created for nothing but toil: if he is deserving, he toils in the Torah; if not, he labors in the soil. Happy is the

¹²⁹ Pirke deRabi Eliezer 12.

¹³⁰ Pesikta Rabbati 21:19.

¹³¹ note 100 on page 445 of Pesikta Rabbati translation.

¹³² Genesis Rabbah 19:6.

¹³³ Genesis 2:15.

¹³⁴ Avot deRabi Natan 22b(1) quotes Genesis 2:16.

man whose toil is in the Torah!"¹³⁵ God's plan for human beings is that they study Torah. But even when they choose to break from that plan, they must still toil. If there ever was an Eden which required no work, Adam had to leave it behind and earn his keep by contributing to God's world.

What then is the meaning of the expression, "to till it and tend it"?¹³⁶ According to Pirke deRabi Eliezer it means only that Adam should have been occupied with the words of Torah and should have kept all its commandments, because the tree of life is the Torah itself.¹³⁷ Tanchuma Buber adds that God said to Adam, "I put you in the Garden of Eden so that you would labor in the Torah and eat from the tree of life; but now that you have sinned, what are you doing here? Get out! So He drove out the human."¹³⁸ Whether toiling in Torah or in soil, God requires that humankind labor to contribute to creation.

"From the beginning of the world's creation, God longed to enter into partnership with humankind."¹³⁹ For the Rabbis, the greatest symbols of the partnership are the Tabernacle and then the Temple. They were the joint building projects of a God and a people devoted to each other and the progress of creation. The stories of the creation of the world and the creation of the Tabernacle and Temple are often depicted as two sides of the same coin. God created the world alone. It never felt complete until human beings agreed to join in the process.

¹³⁵ Genesis Rabbah 13:7.

¹³⁶ Genesis 2:15.

¹³⁷ Pirke deRabi Eliezer 12.

¹³⁸ Tanchuma Buber, Bereshit 1:25.

¹³⁹ Genesis Rabbah 3:9.

One midrash explains how the partnership was not established between God and Adam nor between God and the patriarchs. Only with the building of the Tabernacle did God say, "It is as though this is the beginning of the world's creation. Thereby man has finally done My will and thereby we are one."¹⁴⁰ "The Tabernacle is equal to the creation of the world itself"¹⁴¹ and the building of the Tabernacle is linked thematically to the seven days of creation.¹⁴² The attributes of wisdom, understanding, and knowledge with which the Holy One, blessed be He created His world and fashioned man were possessed by Bezalel, the architect of the Tabernacle.¹⁴³

It is curious that in this collection of midrashim on the beginning of Genesis the Rabbis so often refer to the Tabernacle and the Temple. The parallel is drawn again between the disobedience of Adam and that of Israel. When Adam sinned, God showed him the destruction of the Temple and sent him out of the garden.¹⁴⁴ The garden and the Temple were places in which the will of God and the will of humankind were to be one and the same. In each case, however, human beings chose to leave God's path, and God responded with expulsion.

The following interpretations depict God as a parent who gives her child the freedom to make mistakes. God was disappointed and even pained by Adam and Eve's sin. When a human being chooses to leave the path that God had intended to share, there is a distancing between them. Adam had been closer to God physically than the were angels.¹⁴⁵ However, his sin

¹⁴⁰ Genesis Rabbah 3:9.

¹⁴¹ Tanchuma Yelamdenu, VaYakhel 2.

¹⁴² Numbers Rabbah 12:13.

¹⁴³ Tanchuma Yelamdenu, VaYakhel 3.

¹⁴⁴ Genesis Rabbah 21:8.

caused God to retreat to the first firmament.¹⁴⁶ Both the Temple and Adam were created with God's two hands. When Adam sinned, however, God took away one hand.¹⁴⁷

"Just as I led Adam into the garden of Eden and commanded him, and he transgressed My commandment, whereupon I punished him by dismissal and expulsion, and bewailed him with *ayekah*,¹⁴⁸ so also did I bring his descendants into the Land of Israel and command them, and they transgressed My commandment, and I punished them by sending them away and expelling them, and I bewailed them with *aychah*."¹⁴⁹

Pirke deRabi Eliezer presents an Adam who in the end learns from his mistakes. As if making one last attempt to right his wrong, Adam made a pilgrimage to Mount Moriah, the future site of the Temple. There he built himself a mausoleum, so he could be a part of the devotion that would be expressed there. Adam had learned that every action has consequences, and that people can be easily lured away from God. He decided to hide the mausoleum in the Cave of Machpelah, so no one would ever find his bones to use them for idolatrous worship.¹⁵⁰

Conclusions

This collection of midrashim which spring from highlighted verses of the first three chapters of Genesis open a small window into the vast canon of rabbinic literature. Sometimes an individual interpretation makes its voice

¹⁴⁵ Genesis Rabbah 21:1.

¹⁴⁶ Genesis Rabbah 19:7.

¹⁴⁷ Avot deRabi Natan 18a(1).

¹⁴⁸ Genesis 3:9.

¹⁴⁹ Genesis Rabbah 19:9 quoting Lamentations 1:1, with similar analogies in Genesis Rabbah 21:6, Pesikta deRav Kahana 15:1, Lamentations Rabbah 2:6:10 and 5:21:1, Numbers Rabbah 8:4.

¹⁵⁰ Pirke deRabi Eliezer 20.

heard very clearly. However, as a unit these comments only hint at what the Rabbis believed about free will and divine providence.

By sifting through the hundreds of selected midrashim, some trends do come to the surface. Throughout the ages the Rabbis uniformly speak of the dual nature of humankind. Human beings are created with both the potential to do divine work and the potential to follow more base instincts. And the Rabbis are unified in their position that human nature includes the drive towards increasing wisdom.

Not one midrash teaches that God directly caused Adam and Eve to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. However, throughout the rabbinic period many midrashim support the possibility that God caused other events to transpire, and therefore indirectly determined the sinful act. The middle rabbinic period produced many more of these divine-providence-favoring midrashim than the Tanaitic and Early Amoraic Period.

Similarly, both periods believe that God is omniscient. However, the earlier Rabbis teach that God's omniscience and human free will are not mutually exclusive concepts. The Rabbis of the middle period, on the other hand, tend to express that omniscience dictates providence. When these two issues are considered side by side, they suggest that earlier Rabbis held a more open world view than their later counterparts. The later Rabbis seem to feel more distanced from God and yet more dictated by Him. This phenomenon probably reflects differing political climates.

Uniformly throughout the rabbinic period, the Rabbis see the system of mitzvot as a solution to the conflict between free will and divine providence. God has a plan for the world and through Torah, God has made known how humankind must help to realize the plan. But where there are commandments, there is also always free will. All human beings, like Adam

and Eve, choose whether to accept or reject God's will, and then must deal with the consequences. The Rabbis' ideal is for God's will and the human will to merge, linking heaven and earth in a partnership devoted to creation.

Chapter Three -- Personal Destiny

The midrashim based on the first three chapters of Genesis explore the nature of humankind and how expectations and practice changed through Adam and Eve. The Rabbis interpreted the lives of other biblical characters to understand where providence ends and free will begins in the lives of individuals.

This chapter will analyze midrashim on the "Call to Service" of three leaders who were reluctant to accept the path which God had chosen for them – Jeremiah, Jonah, and Moses. It will study the midrashim which attempt to understand how the relationship between God and His favorite servant, Moses, broke down over the issue of free will. Then it will shift to the midrashim based on the biblical stories of fated love.

Predestined Prophets: *The one to whom God says, "Go on my mission," goes (Tanchuma Buber, VaYera 4).*

The Rabbis looked to the prophets, and Moses in particular, as role models. They considered themselves to be a continuation of the line of leaders among Israel. They knew very well that suffering often comes with leadership, so they could identify with Jonah, Jeremiah, and Moses, who resist God's call. On the other hand, the Rabbis considered each leader to be unique and necessary, somehow singled out for his or her purpose. The following midrashim reflect the opinion that God predetermined the prophetic mission for each one of these men, and therefore, despite their resistance, the lives they would lead were inevitably fixed.

According to Avot deRabi Natan, Moses and Jeremiah, among other servants of God, were born circumcised,¹ as if to show the world these babies were marked for prophecy. Ecclesiastes teaches "Whatever comes into being, the name of it was given long ago."² According to Ecclesiastes Rabbah this refers to Moses and Jeremiah who, since birth, were known as prophets by all who encountered them.³

Since birth, Jeremiah and Moses demonstrated how they were made for speech. Just as the cheeks are made only for speech, so was Moses made only for speech.⁴ Jeremiah was identified as one of the four people who were created as "supremely perfect creatures" by God Himself.⁵ As a newborn he cried out as if he were already full grown, "My bowels! My bowels! I writhe in pain!"⁶ Deuteronomy Rabbah similarly teaches that Moses walked and talked to his parents on the day of his birth. He did not need his mother's milk. And when he was three months old he prophesied and declared that he was destined to receive the law from the midst of flames of fire.⁷

Not only biblical characters are predestined for leadership, according to the Rabbis. The is told of one Yom Kippur when a pregnant woman smelled some food and could not control her craving. The Rabbi told his people to whisper in her ear that it is Yom Kippur. When they did so her craving subsided. The Rabbi cited the verse about Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the belly I knew you."⁸ It is taught that from this woman Rabbi Yochanan

¹ Avot deRabi Natan 18b(2), Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:10.

² Ecclesiastes 6:10.

³ Ecclesiastes Rabbah 6:10:1.

⁴ Song of Songs Rabbah 1:10:1.

⁵ Pesikta deRav Kahana 26:1/2.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:10.

was born.⁹ Jeremiah 1:5 is similarly used as the proof-text to teach that the names of all the righteous and their deeds are revealed before God even before they are born.¹⁰

In addition to the midrashim which support the idea of pre-selected prophets, there are midrashim which claim their specific tasks are predetermined for them as well. For example, Moses is the faithful one who is destined to affix the *Urim* and *Tummim*.¹¹ Because the word *hayah* is used by the Torah in reference to Moses, it was known that he was destined to bring salvation to Israel.¹² Similarly, even before the world was created, Jeremiah was destined to prophesy the destruction of the Temple.¹³

It is surprising that the Tanaitic and early Amoraic materials are far more supportive of the predestination of prophets than are the middle Amoraic midrashim. This seems inconsistent with the findings in chapter two. However, it is difficult to discern whether this speaks to the issue of determinism in general or to that of the unique position of prophets. It could be that the earlier Rabbis believed the prophets to be separate from all other human beings in that they do not have the luxury or burden of choosing the purpose of their lives. This would not exclude free will from the individual choices the prophets make in their lives, as will be shown later in the chapter. Perhaps there are other midrashim that could be analyzed to determine

⁸ Jeremiah 1:5.

⁹ Yoma 82b.

¹⁰ *Mechilta deRabi Ishmael*, Pesacha 7, a similar theme about Jacob and Esau in-utero is found in *Genesis Rabbah* 63:6.

¹¹ *Sifrei* 349:2.

¹² *Esther Rabbah* 6:3, *Exodus Rabbah* 2:4, *Tanchuma Yelamdenu*, *Shemot* 13.

¹³ *Pesikta deRav Kahana* 27/28:1.

whether or not the Rabbis viewed the personal destiny of the average person differently from that of the prophets.

God Ensures Prophecy: *"When God pronounces a decree, no one can revoke it" (Exodus Rabbah 4:3).*

This literature debates the extent of God's involvement in the day-to-day living of individuals. One opinion holds that it is enough for God to simply pronounce one's life mission for it to be so. Another claims that God determines the details of singular moments in order to assure the success of the mission.

Tanchuma Yelamdenu teaches that God controls our eyes, ears, and noses. The proof is the simple fact that we often see, hear, and smell things even though we would choose not to. In contrast, our hands, mouths, and feet are normally in our control. We can choose to use them for sacred purposes or for evil. There are times, however, when God decides to take control over these body parts as well. Examples are drawn from the biblical accounts of Moses, Jonah, Jeremiah, and others.¹⁴

"A man's feet are responsible for him; they lead him to the place where he is wanted."¹⁵ After seven days of trying to persuade Moses to confront Pharaoh, God took control of Moses' feet and forced him to walk to Pharaoh against his will. (Exodus Rabbah 3:15 adds that God controlled Moses' mouth as well.) When Jonah tried to escape God's command, God inflicted all the terrors of the sea upon him and caused Jonah's hair and beard to fall out. In the end, Jonah did indeed travel to Ninevah, but against his will. After Jeremiah protests, God explained how He formed him in the womb only for

¹⁴ Tanchuma Yelamdenu, Toledot 12.

¹⁵ Sukkot 53a and Genesis Rabbah 100:4.

this purpose. Jeremiah must therefore both go against his will and speak against his will.¹⁶ "When God pronounces a decree, no one can revoke it."¹⁷ Moses, Jonah, Jeremiah, and Bilaam all fulfilled God's command against their wills.

The opinion that all prophets were independently wealthy is recorded in Nedarim 38a. Moses did not take one ass from Israel as a fee for his work. Similarly, Jonah paid not only his fare on the ship, but he paid for the whole ship and crew, which Rabbi Pomanus teaches totaled four thousand gold denarii. This does not necessarily support the idea of divine providence. However, the underlying message shows that God ensured the financial stability of His chosen ones, so they would be able to fulfill His command.

The following parable about God's way of dictating the fate of Moses' life was often repeated with slight variations throughout the literature. The Jerusalem Talmud attributes it to Rabbi Yudan speaking in the name of Rabbi Yitzchak. Usually, when a person is brought to trial, his patron is there to help him. But, when that same person is sentenced to be hanged, his patron is nowhere to be found. Such was not the case with Moses and his "Patron." When Moses was arrested for slaying the Egyptian taskmaster he was sentenced to death. Rabbi Yannai teaches that God caused the Egyptian sword to bounce off of Moses' neck, "like an ivory tower."¹⁸ Rabbi Abyatar understood Exodus 18:4 to mean, "Moreover, the sword bounced off Moses' neck and it fell onto Quaestionarius' (the executioner's) neck and killed him." Bar Kapara taught that an angel came down and impersonated Moses, so the Egyptians arrested the angel while Moses escaped. Rabbi Joshua ben

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Exodus Rabbah 4:3.

¹⁸ Song of Songs 7:4.

Levi added that when Moses fled from Pharaoh, all of the Egyptian court became either dumb, deaf, or blind, so they were unable to communicate and retrieve him. Through all of these miracles, God proved to Moses, "I saved you there (when you fled from Pharaoh). I will stand up for you now (when you go before Pharaoh to bring the plagues upon Egypt)."¹⁹

In a similar way, Pirke deRabi Eliezer shows favor to the possibility of divine providence by studying Moses' life story. It was believed that Moses' rod was one of the things created at twilight before the first Sabbath. Adam passed it down through Enoch, Noah, the patriarchs, etc., until Jethro received it when he was a magician for Pharaoh in Egypt. Jethro saw the letters of the tetragrammaton on it (some say the letters of the ten commandments) and he planted it in his garden. When Moses took it from his garden, Jethro prophesied, "In the future, this one will redeem Israel from Egypt."²⁰

Pirke deRabi Eliezer speaks strongly in favor of divine providence when interpreting the Book of Jonah as well. God determines some events far in advance, while He dictates many details as they unfold. Apparently, Jonah knew from Torah that God was in the heavens and on earth, so he rationalized that he could escape as long as he traveled on the sea. From that decision forward, God manipulated the story. God sent a windstorm to bring a ship back to the Jaffa port for Jonah's sake. God caused the lot to fall on Jonah. God had appointed the fish to swallow Jonah on the sixth day of creation.²¹ God directed the fish to give Jonah an elaborate tour of the underworld and to visit the Leviathan. And God did not cue the fish to

¹⁹ Berachot 9:1, Mechilta de Rabi Ishmael, Amalek, 3, Song of Songs Rabbah 7:5:1, Deuteronomy Rabbah 2:29, Exodus Rabbah 1:3, variation found in Exodus Rabbah 3:15.

²⁰ Pirke deRabi Eliezer, Chapter 40.

²¹ Also taught in Berachot 8a and Genesis Rabbah 5:4.

release Jonah until he vowed to fulfill both God's commands to warn Ninevah and to prepare the Leviathan as a feast for God on the day the Messiah will come to redeem Israel. As a result, when the sailors witnessed all of God's greatness, they immediately threw away their idols, traveled to Jerusalem, circumcised themselves, offered sacrifices, and feared God exceedingly.²² (Deuteronomy Rabbah also asserts that God Himself saved Jonah from the sea.²³)

There are many more midrashim from the middle Amoraic period which depict God as constantly interceding in the lives of individuals than from the Tanaitic and early Amoraic periods. While the earlier Rabbis seem convinced of the unique position of prophets, they resisted believing that God consistently causes details of individual lives to play out one way or another. The later Rabbis seem more comfortable, even comforted, by the possibility that the God of Israel is One who can and does determine personal destinies day by day, moment by moment.

The Right to Refuse Prophecy: *"Do you think if you refuse to fulfill My message I have no one else to send?" (Exodus Rabbah 10:1).*

The following midrashim are more complicated than those above. While the previously studied interpretations fall to one end of the free will/providence spectrum, the following come closer to the center. They agree that both God's will and free will factor into the unfolding of personal destinies, however, the proportions between the two opinions do vary. Each midrash marks the point of balance at a different place along the spectrum.

²² Pirke deRabbi Eliezer, Chapter 10.

²³ Deuteronomy Rabbah 2:29.

Chapter Ten of Exodus Rabbah begins with what at first glance seems to be a strong argument for predestination. The Rabbis teach, "Even those creatures you consider superfluous in the world, like flies, bugs, and gnats, nevertheless have their allotted task in the scheme of creation." Rabbi Acha bar Chanina adds, "Even those creatures which you consider to be superfluous in the world, like serpents and scorpions, still have their definite place in the scheme of creation." However, then the midrash turns to present a specific combination of free will and divine providence. "For God said to His prophets: 'Do you think if you refuse to fulfill My message I have no one else to send?'"²⁴

This midrash teaches that God has a plan for the world and expectations of every creature down to the gnat. However, every one of God's creatures is made with the free will to choose a path for itself. If one's will is the same as God's will, God is pleased. If, however, one diverges from God's expectations, so be it. God will simply call on another one of His creatures to realize His plan. The characters are expendable, but God's will is ultimately fulfilled.

After seven days of God's persuading him with words, Moses agreed to go to Pharaoh. However, he announced that he will go only if one condition is met. Perhaps Moses is motivated by revenge. Perhaps he was remembering his last encounter with Pharaoh when he said to God, "Pharaoh is a descendent of Ham. He does not respond to words, but only suffering. I will only go to him if I can chastise him with suffering."²⁵

Tanchuma Yelamdenu suggests that Moses was not motivated by revenge, but by his love for Israel. Moses was compared to a cow wearing a

²⁴ Exodus Rabbah 10:1.

²⁵ Exodus Rabbah 3:14.

yoke. The cow hated to plow, so the farmer put the baby calf in the middle of the field. When the cow heard her calf crying, she plowed the field in order to reach her. Similarly, did Moses take on the task against his will. He would not have put the yoke on himself. God determined that for him. However, if Moses wanted to hold his ground, he could have, but his love for the next generation of Israel was too great. Because of the potential he saw in his people, he chose to go to Pharaoh.²⁶

Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Papias always had opposing views when it came to the free will/divine providence debate. Forever the defender of free will, Rabbi Akiva insisted that the Holy One blessed be He has set two ways before us, life and death. Resh Lakish agreed and taught how just like Adam, Jonah chose to flee from God's command and chose the path of death. Therefore, like Adam, Jonah's glory did not stay with him overnight.²⁷

Rabbi Papias interpreted Job 23:13 to mean that because God stands as the only god in His world, there is no one to interfere with Him or His decisions. Rabbi Akiva took the unpopular position that God does not work as Papias suggested. He said firmly, "That is enough, Papias! God does everything according to the Torah. Just as the petitioner can petition here below, so does God consider the petitions above. Just as the Sanhedrin conducts proceedings below, so it is above."²⁸ Akiva suggested that individuals on earth can make their preferences known to God. Offering petitions and arguments in favor of one path over another is a kind of free will. God is the Judge Who makes the ultimate ruling. But there is a system in place by which human will and divine will can interact.

²⁶ Tanchuma Yelamdenu, VaYeshev 4.

²⁷ Genesis Rabbah 21:5.

²⁸ Tanchuma Buber, Vayera 4:21 with related material found in Mechilta deRabi Ishmael, Beshalach 7, Tanchuma Buber Exodus 1:14, and Tanchuma 1:18.

Why they Flee from God's Call to Service: "Who am I?" (Exodus 30:2).

Jonah

Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 14:14 calls Jonah's prophecy into question. Perhaps to defend his namesake, Rabbi Jonah insisted, "He was a true prophet." He attributed Jonah's flight to the fact that Ninevites were experts when it came to repentance. Jonah was afraid that if he prophesied as God commanded, the people of Ninevah would repent, and the Holy One, blessed be He, consequently would turn to punish Israel. Out of love for Israel, Jonah felt he had no choice but to flee.²⁹ Mechilta deRabi Ishmael agrees that concern for Israel was Jonah's motivation for fleeing. Rabbi Nathan teaches that after God addressed him twice, Jonah decided to take the voyage only in order to drown himself in the sea. He was among the many patriarchs and prophets who literally offered their lives on Israel's behalf.³⁰

Pirke deRabi Eliezer does not give Jonah the benefit of the doubt as the earlier midrashim do. The earlier Rabbis could imagine that Jonah fled for the sake of noble causes. In contrast, here he is accused of running from God because he feared his reputation would be further threatened. God had sent Jonah on such missions before. Once he was sent to prophesy that Israel's borders would not be restored. A second time, he was sent to Jerusalem to prophesy that God would destroy the city. On both occasions, God was merciful and spared the people of Israel. Consequently, Jonah became known as "the lying prophet." He felt it was bad enough that the Jewish world made such accusations, he did not want the nations, who are quick to repent, to be

²⁹ Sanhedrin 11:5.

³⁰ Mechilta deRabi Ishmael, Pesacha 1.

able to make the same claims about him when they are forgiven. And so he fled.³¹

Jeremiah

It is not surprising that Jeremiah would not want the task God assigned to him. It is taught in Pesikta deRav Kahana that Jeremiah was furious that out of all the prophets before and after him, he was the one selected to prophesy the destruction of the Temple. He asked God, "What sins have I committed that I am punished with this task?"³² God only pronounced that since before the creation of the world Jeremiah was selected for the task. Perhaps this comes to teach that the task was not a punishment of any kind.

The piska continues to describe how painful -- both physically and emotionally -- it was for Jeremiah to fulfill God's command. When he would prophesy in Jerusalem, the people would say, "Do not prophesy in the name of the Lord,"³³ to which Jeremiah could only respond, "I do not want to, but what can I do? It is in my heart like a burning fire, I am like a woman set on her birthstone"..."My bowels, my bowels! I writhe in pain! The chambers of my heart! My heart moans within me!"³⁴

Another voice, an accusing voice, is heard in Pesikta deRav Kahana. Here Jeremiah is said to have resisted God's call to service out of fear for his life. Even before he knew he would prophesy the destruction of the Temple, Jeremiah said, "Master of the universe, I cannot prophesy to them. Whatever prophet went before Israel, they wanted to kill." He continued to list the

³¹ Pirke deRabi Eliezer, Chapter 10.

³² Pesikta deRav Kahana 27/28:1.

³³ Jeremiah 11:21.

³⁴ Jeremiah 4:19.

near-death experiences of Moses, Aaron, Elijah, and Elisha. Despite his efforts, God did not change His mind. When he was told that he would be the one to prophesy the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem, Jeremiah cursed the day he was born.³⁵ He likened himself to a High Priest who realized the woman he was to accuse of adultery was his own mother.³⁶

Another possibility is considered in Tanchuma Buber. Perhaps Jeremiah refused the challenge, because he feared he was too inexperienced to succeed. He says to God, "I am only a lad." But God would not hear it. Rabbi Pinchas bar Chama the Priest, expounding on Job 23:13, teaches that because God is unique in His world, He knows justice for His creatures. The one to whom God says, "Go on my mission," goes. So it was with Jeremiah.³⁷

This is only a small sample of midrashim here. However, it is still worth noting the contrasts among them. The earlier midrashim of Pesikta deRav Kahana are more interested in the human reactions Jeremiah had to God's command. The later midrash found in Tanchuma Buber concerns itself with how God makes the rulings He does and how God does not appreciate nor respond to human petition.

Moses

The Rabbis call him "Moses our Rabbi." He is the quintessential model of one who dedicated himself to doing God's will and grew closer to God as a result. Although he is called "God's mouthpiece" and "servant," there are many cases in the biblical account in which Moses acted independently or even counter to God's command, as we will see later in the chapter. The

³⁵ Jeremiah 20:14.

³⁶ Pesikta deRav Kahana, Piska 26:1/2.

³⁷ Tanchuma Buber, VaYera 4.

scene at the burning bush was when Moses and God first enter into their contract of wills. From the very beginning of their relationship there was already a tension between their wills. The following midrashim attempt to better understand this conflict.

Mechilta deRabi Ishmael implies that Moses' call to service put a strain on his family life. First it is suggested that Moses was actually forced to divorce Tziporah in order to pursue his career with God. Another voice claims that initially Tziporah and their children came with Moses to Egypt, but soon after, at Aaron's suggestion, they traveled back to Jethro's home for safety while Moses stayed on in Egypt.³⁸ Sifrei teaches that Moses refused God's instruction because he would not abandon his father-in-law who had been so kind and hospitable to him. Moses had made a vow that he would return to Jethro, so God sent him first to Jethro to seek his blessing as an annulment of the vow.³⁹ Tanchuma Yelamdenu teaches that Moses did not resist because he did not want to take on God's challenge, but because he was afraid of how his position of power would make his brother, Aaron, feel. When Moses expressed his concerns to God, Aaron was made Moses' partner.⁴⁰

The most rational, but most surprising, argument Moses presented to avoid God's challenge was when he argued that God Himself should go to Egypt. "Why does the King of Kings need Moses to go and do His work for Him?"⁴¹ Exodus Rabbah continues with this theme. Moses asked, "Who am I?"⁴² "Didn't You promise that You Yourself would redeem Israel? Didn't

³⁸ Mechilta deRabi Ishmael, Amalek 3.

³⁹ Sifrei 27:1, Exodus Rabbah 3:17.

⁴⁰ Tanchuma Yelamdenu Shemot 27, Exodus Rabbah 3:16.

⁴¹ Sifrei 325:1.

You promise Abraham that You would judge? Didn't You also promise Jacob? And now You're commanding that I go to Egypt?" God answered, "By your life, I will go down and save them. First you go and tell Israel that I am coming to redeem them. Then I Myself will do so."⁴³

Another explanation of why Moses so persistently resisted God's command is because he did not believe he was qualified for the task.⁴⁴ Moses was quick to say he would offer his life for Israel's benefit, but he feared his life would not be enough to ensure the success of their journey. He listed all the special needs of the nursing mothers, the pregnant women, and the infants who would each demand special food, rest and care. He was afraid he would lead them into danger. He wondered how he would explain to the patriarchs that he had ruined "their flock." God assured him, "If you do not know now, you'll know in the end." Here God did not say, "I will make it right through miracles, etc." Rather He spoke in favor of human capabilities and wisdom.⁴⁵

In contrast, later in Exodus Rabbah, the same midrash ends with a different message. Moses was fearful for all the same reasons. However, when God assured him, it was not by reminding Moses of his special talents and insights. Rather, God said, "Through My miracles, 'you will know how I will lead them.'" The midrash offers comfort to the audience of its own day and every generation when it asserts that God stays close by when people are most afraid.⁴⁶

⁴² Exodus 30:2.

⁴³ Exodus Rabbah 15:14, parallel in Exodus Rabbah 3:4 and 3:16.

⁴⁴ Exodus Rabbah 3:4.

⁴⁵ Song of Songs Rabbah 1:7:1&2.

⁴⁶ Exodus Rabbah 3:4.

Deuteronomy Rabbah suggests that Moses resisted God's command, because of his great humility before God. Before the One who created mouths and the power of speech itself, Moses said, "I am not a man of words."⁴⁷ However, before Israel he had the confidence to say fluently, "These are the words."⁴⁸ The situation is explained through a parable in which a man who sold purple dyes called out, "Purple! Purple!" to the people in the marketplace. When the king himself asked him what he was selling, he humbly answered, "Nothing," because it seemed like nothing of any value before the king.⁴⁹ Similarly, Moses is compared to an orphan girl, whom the king wanted to marry. She said, "I am not fit to marry a king." Likewise, Moses did not feel he was fit to represent God before Pharaoh.⁵⁰

Again it is Pirke deRabi Eliezer which paints our prophets in a negative light, never forgetting that they were only human. There it is taught that Moses resisted returning to Pharaoh because he feared his life would be in jeopardy. He begs God, "Do not turn me over to the hands of my enemies." But God assured him that his enemies were dead and powerless by then.⁵¹

Exodus Rabbah teaches that Moses fled from God's command at the burning bush, because he was embarrassed. Moses sinned with his words and he knew that sin brings death. He was afraid God would punish him with death right then and there, and so he fled. If he had not sinned, he would not have fled.⁵²

⁴⁷ Exodus 4:10.

⁴⁸ Deuteronomy 1:1.

⁴⁹ Deuteronomy Rabbah 1:7.

⁵⁰ Numbers Rabbah 21:15.

⁵¹ Pirke deRabi Eliezer, Chapter 40.

⁵² Exodus Rabbah 3:12.

The midrashim from the Tanaitic and early Amoraic periods introduce the plan that Moses had for himself, the plan which God had interrupted. The comments from the middle Amoraic period, in contrast, emphasize Moses' humility and therefore, distance from God. The Moses, recreated by these later midrashim, was much more accepting of God's will, even when he was "rejecting" it. It is not that his will was determined to fulfill some other plan as the earlier midrashim suggest. Rather, he felt very small compared to the greatness of the task at hand.

Punishment for Resistance: *"You treat me unjustly. Your expectations of me are too high" (Exodus Rabbah 43:8).*

According to the following midrashim, when God makes His will known to an individual, it is sinful to resist it. However, out of the three who resisted God's call to service, only Moses was punished. For the sake of this study of free will and divine providence, it is important to understand what it was about Moses' willful resistance that warranted punishment.

The Tanaim teach that God's anger was kindled against Moses because he was resistant to God's command. Rabbi Simeon bar Yochai suggests that originally God wanted Moses to be the priest and Aaron the Levite. However, because He was met with so much resistance, God punished Moses by making him the Levite and Aaron the priest. Others extend the punishment for resistance to have included that Moses' descendants would be denied the honor of priesthood as well.⁵³

Resh Lakish offers an explanation which is often repeated. It was not Moses' resistance which was sinful. Rather, it was his stating that God's plan would not work, because the people of Israel would not accept it. Resh Lakish

⁵³ Zevachim 102a, Exodus Rabbah 3:17 and 4:14, variation found in Exodus Rabbah 7:2.

asserts, "He who entertains a suspicion against innocent people is punished physically." Although Moses complained, "But, behold, they will not believe me,"⁵⁴ it was revealed to the Holy One blessed be He that Israel would believe, but ultimately Moses would not. Because Moses falsely accused Israel he was struck with leprosy.⁵⁵ Tanchuma Yelamdenu considers such words to be slander. God scolded Moses, "You have spoken slanderously against My children just as the serpent spoke slanderously." A wordplay is used to show that Moses will someday use his hand to strike the rock and will be punished then for the slander he spoke years earlier.⁵⁶

The following parable similarly shows Moses' disbelief in God's plan because of his low image of the people of Israel. Although God was certain of Israel's behavior, Moses could not trust God more than he trusted what he already knew of Israel. Here Moses is presented as a rationalist, whose will is determined by his mind rather than by faith.

A certain man bought a slave for himself, he asked the owner if the slave was mischievous or well-behaved. Although he was told honestly that the slave was mischievous, the man purchased him anyway. When the slave behaved wickedly, the new master threatened to kill him. The slave said, "You treat me unjustly!" "How so?" The slave explained, "You purchased me as a bad slave, and yet your expectations of me are of a good slave." A parallel is drawn to Moses and Israel. When God tried to "sell" Israel to Moses, Moses asked, "Why should I take these people if they are idolaters?" God answered, "You can only see them now as idolaters, but I can foresee them departing from Egypt, and My dividing the Red Sea for them, and

⁵⁴ Exodus 4:1.

⁵⁵ Shabbat 97a, Song of Songs 1:2-3, Numbers Rabbah 7:5, Exodus Rabbah 3:13.

⁵⁶ Tanchuma Yelamdenu, Shemot 23. Parallel found in Exodus Rabbah 3:12.

bringing them into the wilderness, and giving them the Law and revealing Myself to them face to face, and I can see them accepting my kingship, yet denying Me at the end of forty days by making the Calf." Just as the slave spoke for himself, "You treat me unjustly. Your expectations of me are too high," so did Moses speak on Israel's behalf. He said, "If You know that they will make a Calf, why do You deliver them? Why don't You slay them now?"⁵⁷

Genesis Rabbah teaches that one who elevates himself at the cost of his fellow man's degradation has no share in the World to Come. How much more so when it is done at the expense of the glory of God! Moses embarrassed God. He made God look weak by refusing to do His will, and this was his sin.⁵⁸

However, it is also taught that Moses learned his lesson. Rabbi Pinchas teaches in the name of Rabbi Levi the following proverb: "One who has been bitten by a snake is afraid of a rope." Moses was "bitten" because he did not trust in God's plan and he accused Israel of being non-believers. Therefore, when Israel went and worshipped the Golden Calf, Moses did not say, "I told you so." He chose his words very carefully, showing respect for God's plan.⁵⁹

Throughout this literature, the Rabbis agree that Moses' sin was his lack of faith. Whether he was informed by Israel's disbelief, or his own fears, Moses did not trust that God's plan was possible. Once he could see that anything was possible for God, he gladly allied himself and his own will with God's will. But God would always remember Moses' initial resistance and disbelief.

⁵⁷ Exodus Rabbah 43:8.

⁵⁸ Genesis Rabbah 1:5.

⁵⁹ Song of Songs Rabbah 1:2:3.

A Partnership of Wills: *"Make God's will your will, so that He may make your will His will" (Yehuda HaNasi, Pirke Avot 2:4).*

Rabbi Jose ben Jeremiah asks, "Why are the prophets compared to women? To show that just as a woman is not ashamed to demand from her husband the requirements of her household, neither were the prophets ashamed to demand the requirements of Israel from their Father in heaven."⁶⁰

Although the Rabbis would not say that God was dependent on Moses for the exodus from Egypt, they do stress the intimate relationship between God and Moses. Of all the prophets God called Moses to come close to Him.⁶¹ Moses most often chose to do God's will. However, God did rely on Moses to use his own judgment and leadership skills to successfully bring Israel as far as the Jordan. Their relationship can best be described as a partnership of wills. God made clear what His plan was for Israel and Moses usually chose to participate to reach that end.

The following midrashim show that because of the choices Moses made, because of his behavior, God saw him fit for the task. Rabbi Akiva teaches in the name of Rabbi Simeon ben Azzai, "Go two or three seats lower and take your seat, until they say to you, 'Come up,' rather than that you should go up and they should say to you, 'Go down.' Moses is an example of such humility. When God appeared to him at the burning bush, Moses hid his face. Therefore, did the Holy One blessed be He call him up to go before Pharaoh."⁶²

⁶⁰ Song of Songs Rabbah 1:7:2.

⁶¹ Pesikta Rabbati 4:2.

⁶² Leviticus Rabbah 1:5.

Whenever Moses approached God with special courtesy, frankness, lack of directness or clarity on certain affairs, God reciprocates. Moses insulted God with the word "hen."⁶³ With that very word, therefore did God praise Moses and punish him.⁶⁴ Like a king who gave orders for a man to be beheaded with the very sword that he gave the king as a gift, so did God sentence Moses to death with the very word by which Moses had praised him.⁶⁵ Similarly, Moses reciprocated the way by which God addressed him. For seven days God spoke with clarity to persuade Moses, commanding him to go before Pharaoh. Later, Moses offered direct supplication for seven days,⁶⁶ while trying to persuade God to allow him to enter the Land of Israel.⁶⁶

There is a popular parable which indicates that God also wonders where His providence ends and free will begins. A king hired a tenant to care for his vineyard. When it produced good wine, the king said, "My vineyard." When it produced bad wine, the king referred to it as, "Your vineyard." The tenant respectfully, but firmly reminded the king, "Whether the wine it produces is good or bad, it is still your vineyard." So it was with God and Moses. When Israel was good, God called them, "My people."⁶⁷ When they rejected God's command, however, by building the Golden Calf, God called them, "Your people" when talking to Moses. In reply, Moses reminded, "Whether they are good or bad, they are still your people."⁶⁸

⁶³ Exodus 4:1.

⁶⁴ Deuteronomy 5:14.

⁶⁵ Deuteronomy Rabbah 9:6.

⁶⁶ Leviticus Rabbah 11:5, Tanchuma Yelamdenu Chayei Sarah 6.

⁶⁷ Exodus 3:10.

⁶⁸ Pesikta deRav Kahana 16:9, Pesikta Rabbati 9, Ecclesiastes Rabbah 6:10:1, Exodus Rabbah 43:9.

The Rabbis highlight the partnership shared by God and Moses. Moses' following God's command was rewarded and reciprocated. It is asked, "For whose sake did God reveal Himself in Egypt?" It was for Moses' sake. The situation is likened to that of a priest who has an orchard of figs planted in a field which is unclean, because crushed bones have been added to the soil. The priest sent a messenger to the tenant of the orchard, requesting two figs. The tenant demanded to know who was the owner of the orchard. The priest decided to go to the field himself, but the messenger-servant warned him about the unclean status of the field. The priest replied, "Even if there were one hundred forms of uncleanness there, I would go, so that my messenger-servant would not be put to shame." Similarly, when Israel was in Egypt, God sent Moses, but eventually God decided to go Himself. The angels warned, "It is unclean in Egypt!" to which God replied, "Yes, but My messenger Moses must not be put to shame."⁶⁹

Song of Songs Rabbah compares the relationship between God and Moses to that of a particular king and queen. From her deathbed, the queen instructed the king to take care of their children. The king responded, "You should instead command the children to take care of me." Likewise, before his death, Moses instructed God to take care of Israel. God responded, "I had to beg you to lead them and now you're telling Me to look after them? You should instruct them to care for Me instead."⁷⁰

Throughout the Rabbinic literature, the relationship between Moses and God is described as a partnership of wills. However, the midrashim produced by the Tana'im and the early Amoraim tend to emphasize the intimacy between God and Moses. The Amoraim of the middle rabbinic

⁶⁹ Exodus Rabbah 15:19.

⁷⁰ Song of Songs Rabbah 1:10:1.

period tend to point out that despite their partnership, each one maintained a level of distance, keeping their positions distinct from one another.

Moses Strikes the Rock at the Waters of Meribah

For years Moses served as the instrument through which God's will was realized. Whether or not Moses took that role against his will, it is still most surprising, when Moses rejected God's command at the Waters of Meribah. The Rabbis try to understand why Moses made such a choice and why God responded as He did.

God is compared to a king who wanted to marry an orphan girl. She resisted and refused, saying, "I am not fit to marry a king." After seven rounds of persuasion, she finally agreed. Later the king grew angry with the orphan girl and demanded a divorce. She argued, "I did not ask to be married to you! It was you who asked me! You had better treat your next wife more respectfully than you have treated me." Rabbi Samuel ben Nachmani teaches that so it was with God and Moses. It took seven days for God to convince Moses to take on His task. When God prohibited Moses from entering the Land of Israel, he argued, "I did not ask for this task! You had better treat my successor, Joshua, better than You have treated me."⁷¹

In the end Moses could not contend with One stronger than he. When he asked to go into the land, God said simply, "Let it suffice thee." The decree was final.⁷² Still the Rabbis attempt to discern whether Moses acted according to his own will at the Waters of Meribah or whether God willed his action there as He had so many times before.

⁷¹ Numbers Rabbah 21:15.

⁷² Mechilta deRabi Ishmael Amalek 2, Ecclesiastes Rabbah 6:10:1, Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:10.

Divine Providence Dictated Moses' Action: *"And You shall take of the water of the river" (Exodus 4:9).*

The following midrashim believe God predetermined that Moses would reject His command and strike the rock. Since the beginning of creation, according to Genesis Rabbah, God knew that Moses would be punished at the Waters of Meribah. Therefore, God did not call the water "good" on the second day of creation.⁷³

According to Exodus Rabbah, even the Egyptian astrologers could foresee that Israel's redeemer would be struck by water. They interpreted the foresight to indicate that he would drown and so they decreed that every son of Israel be cast into the river. However, it was in fact Moses' fate at the waters of Meribah which the Egyptians had foreseen.⁷⁴

Again Exodus Rabbah considers the event at the Waters of Meribah to have been predetermined, when it teaches that "And You shall take of the water of the river"⁷⁵ was in fact a hint to Moses. Because of a single word which he would one day say to them (i.e. "*hamorim*"), the water would turn to blood. It is taught that when Moses struck the rock the first time, blood gushed from it, and therefore, he had to hit it a second time for water.⁷⁶ The implication here is that God taunted Moses until he lost his temper.

The following midrashim teach that not only was Moses' rejection of God's command predetermined, but so was the time of his death. The Bible refers to the death of Moses ten times. Therefore, ten times it was decreed in advance of his sin, that Moses would not enter the land of Israel. However,

⁷³ Genesis Rabbah 4:6.

⁷⁴ Exodus Rabbah 1:18.

⁷⁵ Exodus 4:9.

⁷⁶ Genesis Rabbah 4:6, Exodus Rabbah 3:13.

the final decree was not sealed until the Heavenly Court made its ruling.⁷⁷ Just as God told Adam in a roundabout way that he brought death into the world, so did God tell Moses in a roundabout way that he would not enter the land.⁷⁸ Long before the fact, it was written in the Torah that he would die on Mount Nebo.⁷⁹

A parable is told of a pregnant woman who was thrown into jail. Her son was born there and grew up there. As the king passed by, the son asked, "Why am I in prison?" "Because of the sin of your mother," was the answer. Similarly, Moses said to God, "There are thirty-six sins that are punishable by death according to the Torah. I have not done one of them. Why, then, am I sentenced to death?" "You will die because of the sin of the first man who brought death into the world."⁸⁰ This implies that Moses' death was not punishment for any sin, but just a matter of the human condition since Adam.

The majority of these midrashim which favor the idea of providence are produced by the middle period of the Amoraim. However, they are clearly a part of the earlier literature as well.

Moses Chooses his Actions Freely: *"Out of his own will, one goes towards death" (Yoma 86b-87a).*

Tanchuma considers the scene at the Waters of Meribah to have been a turning point. No matter who willed it, after Moses struck the rock, everything changed for him, his power, and his relationship with God.

⁷⁷ Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:10.

⁷⁸ E.g., Numbers 20:10, Deuteronomy 1:35.

⁷⁹ Tanchuma Yelamdenu Vayeshev 4.

⁸⁰ Deuteronomy 9:8.

When Moses begged for forgiveness, God explained to him, "Know that until now fate had been in your power, but now fate is no longer in your power."⁸¹

The following midrashim support the notion that Moses was fully responsible for his actions, that God did not dictate his behavior in any way. Numbers Rabbah explains the dilemma which Moses faced at the Waters of Meribah. Throughout their desert journey, Israel observed the so-called miracles which Moses performed for them. They reasoned, "Surely, Moses knows the natural properties of this particular rock. If he really wants to prove his miraculous powers, let him bring water for us from this other rock!" Moses debated, "If I listen to their challenge, then I disregard God's command. But God also commanded in the Book of Job, 'Take the wise in their own craftiness.'"⁸² Moses was watching his temper because of God's warning, "Surely one of these men shall not see the good land."⁸³ However, when they pressed him again to bring water from another rock, he lost his temper, called Israel *hamorim*, and struck the other rock. The first strike only brought a very slow trickle of water. Israel provoked Moses by complaining, "Is this water for suckling babies?" He lost his temper again and struck the rock a second time. This time the water was overwhelming and nearly flooded them.⁸⁴ In the end, when Moses lowered his staff, he could see that the rock he struck was actually the very rock which God had originally selected. It was miraculously positioned below the one which Israel selected, in order to test Moses.⁸⁵ As pointed out in chapter two, a test implies free

⁸¹ Tanchuma Veetchanan 6, Tanchuma Buber 5:11.

⁸² Job 5:13.

⁸³ Deuteronomy 1:34.

⁸⁴ Interpreting Numbers 20:11.

⁸⁵ Numbers Rabbah 19:9.

will. God would not benefit from offering a test which He "fixed" Himself. Moses may have failed the test, but he acted on his own.

Others teach that Moses' failure was inevitable not because God dictated it, but because of the nature of Moses' task. Israel is likened to a nut tree, which is smooth and therefore difficult to climb. Those who attempt to serve Israel are like those who try to climb the nut tree. They must be experts or else they will slip and fall. When Moses called Israel "rebels," he slipped.⁸⁶ Even the best servants of Israel (e.g. Moses, Elijah, Isaiah) all fell.⁸⁷

Despite what the biblical account tells of Moses' longing to enter the Land of Israel, Rav teaches that Moses actually chose his own death. "Out of his own will, one goes towards death. He is unable to fulfill the wishes of his household, for he returns empty to his home."⁸⁸ It is not surprising that this very clear statement in favor of free will over providence, even when death is concerned, was produced by the Tanaim.

What was Moses' crime?: *"It is because of you, Israel, not because of me"*

(Mechilta, Amalek 2, Sifrei 29:1).

Not all of the Rabbis agreed that the striking of the rock was Moses' sin. It was important for the Rabbis to understand the nature of Moses' sin, for he was the first judge of Israel. If his judgment was miscalculated when determining his own behavior, how much more easily could the Rabbis misjudge their actions or those of their people. Once the Rabbis understood the nature of Moses' sin, they could better understand where his will and God's will came into conflict and what was the result.

⁸⁶ Numbers 20:10.

⁸⁷ Pesikta deRav Kahana 11:2.

⁸⁸ Yoma 86a-87b.

The Rabbis debate whether or not Moses sinned at all. Rabbi Ammi states, "There is no death without sin," implying that one's sins cause one's death. An anonymous objector insists that Moses and Aaron did not sin, and yet they died. Rabbi Simeon ben Eleazar argues, "Moses and Aaron also died through their sin. If they had believed in God, they would not have died as soon as they did." Thereby Rabbi Simeon ben Eleazar proves that their punishment was that they should not lead Israel into the land, not that they should die. Death would be a disproportionate punishment for their fault.⁸⁹

Similarly, Sifrei teaches that Moses' punishment does not match the sin of striking the rock, so it must have been for some other reason. Moses was tested many times by God and he always proved himself to be flawless. Perhaps this test was "fixed" by God, who needed an excuse to bring an end to Moses' life. This time Moses said, "Hear now, you rebels, are ~~we~~ to bring you forth water out of this rock?"⁹⁰ Sifrei's comment continues boldly by stating that God brought false charges against Moses, because despite their involvement, Miriam and Aaron were not charged like Moses was.⁹¹

In contrast, Genesis Rabbah teaches that Moses and Aaron were both punished. Their sin had nothing to do with the rock. Their collective sin was calling Israel, "rebels."⁹² Pesikta deRav Kahana offers a parable. Moses is compared to a tutor of the prince. The king instructed the tutor, "Whatever you do, do not call my son '*moreh*.'" Rabbi Reuven explains "*moreh*" to mean "moron." One day, however, the son angered the tutor, so the tutor called him "*moreh*." The king was furious and said, "This was the one

⁸⁹ Shabbat 55a-b. Parallel in Yoma 87a.

⁹⁰ Numbers 20:10.

⁹¹ Sifrei 349:2.

⁹² Genesis Rabbah 99:5.

command that I gave you and you rejected it. A man as clever as you should be spared further business with a moron." Likewise, God gave Moses the one command, "Do not call My children morons." But when they angered him at the Waters of Meribah, he did just that. God said, "Men as clever as you should be spared further business with morons." God punished Moses, Aaron, and Miriam for this sin.⁹³ Avot deRabi Natan also teaches that Moses' sin was his speaking out of anger.⁹⁴ The text warns that if it could happen to Moses, how much more easily could it happen to the average person.⁹⁵

Rabbi Eleazar the son of Rabbi Simon teaches that Moses' real sin was evading responsibility. He turned to Israel and said, "It is because of you, Israel, not because of me. You caused it so that I may not enter the Land of Israel."⁹⁶ Because Moses tries to place his blame onto his people, God would not accept his prayer.

Exodus Rabbah explains that Moses' sin was the same as the sins of Miriam, Isaac, and Jacob. They all disregarded the power of judgment. God did not tell them what punishments they would receive if they did not follow His command. However, they were close enough to God to know that His judgments are real and strict. Because they refused to consider the extent of God's power, harsh decrees were announced against them.⁹⁷

Deuteronomy Rabbah offers still another explanation. Moses was not allowed to be buried in his land, because he had denied his Israelite roots

⁹³ Pesikta deRav Kahana 14:5.

⁹⁴ Exodus 24:14.

⁹⁵ Avot deRabi Natan 16b.

⁹⁶ Mechilta deRabi Ishmael Amalek 2, Sifrei 29:1.

⁹⁷ Exodus Rabbah 30:11.

when Jethro's daughters inquired about his heritage. When they returned to Jethro, the daughters called Moses "this Egyptian." From this we can assume that Moses claimed he was an Egyptian.⁹⁸

Sifrei teaches that Moses' real sin was that he did not consider the power of his position at the Waters of Meribah. His rebellion could lead to many other rebellions. His broken faith could lead to many other broken faiths. Therefore, his leadership position dictated a severe punishment. God asked Moses, "You recognized the signs that were within your power in minor matters, why did you not do so in this matter?"⁹⁹

Numbers Rabbah builds on this teaching. Moses' faith was questionable when he wondered if the food supply would be enough for Israel in the desert.¹⁰⁰ God did not decree against him then because no one was there to witness Moses' doubt. However, the case of the Waters of Meribah was a public announcement of doubt. The earlier situation is likened to the case of the king's friend who insulted the king in private and was forgiven. The scene at the Waters of Meribah, on the other hand, is like when the friend insulted the king publicly. Then the King had no choice but to punish him harshly.¹⁰¹

Masechet Yoma teaches that Moses requested his sin be recorded in the Torah, while David requested his more severe sin not be specified. They are compared to two women who in court received the punishment of stripes. One did a very indecent act. The other ate unripe figs in the Sabbatical year. The one who ate the figs requested that her sin be publicized. The court

⁹⁸ Deuteronomy Rabbah 2:8.

⁹⁹ Sifrei 340:1 & 2.

¹⁰⁰ Numbers 11:22.

¹⁰¹ Numbers Rabbah 19:10&14, Exodus Rabbah 3:13.

agreed to hang a necklace of figs around her neck so that all would know her charge was not for the same indecency of the other woman. Numbers tells every reader that Moses' "crime" was not equal to the sins of the rebellious Israelites.¹⁰² It specifies his sin to have been when he did not believe in God enough to sanctify Him at the Waters of Meribah.¹⁰³

Most of the midrashim which consider other behaviors that may have warranted such severe punishment come out of the Tanaitic and early Amoraic literatures. An action like striking a rock can be easily attributed to divine intervention. However, a complex process of thoughts and emotions which would lead Moses to lose faith in God and insult His people verbally is more likely a result of an independent will at work. Rabbis throughout the ages could not easily accept that Moses would act so rashly by striking the rock. The later Amoraim were comfortable with accepting the simpler explanation – that God must have willed him to do so. The earlier Rabbis, however, had to dig deeper for an explanation that does not rely on, "Because God said so."

Bargaining and Begging: The Clash of the Wills

Moses begged God to overturn His decree against him. Every reader sympathizes with Moses. Overall, he had been faithful to God's will and God's command. He had been God's most intimate partner. He had endured real hardship, sacrifice, and suffering. And Moses was only human. The bargaining that took place over the course of seven days, according to the Rabbis, was when God's will and Moses' will clashed like never before. In the past, either God altered His will to match Moses', but more likely Moses

¹⁰² Numbers 20:12.

¹⁰³ Yoma 86b-87a, paralleled in Numbers Rabbah 19:12.

changed his will to follow God. Here they opposed each other. Moses was fighting for his life and God would not waver.

God and Moses are compared to a king and his son. The king instructed the son that he was not permitted to enter the king's bedroom. When the prince entered the gates of the palace, he was met and greeted by the king. Then he entered the reception room, and again he was met and greeted by the king. However, when the prince went to the entrance of the bedroom, the king said, "From this point onward, you are forbidden to enter." Similarly, Moses came closer and closer to the Land of Israel, but God stopped him at a certain point and said, "No further."¹⁰⁴

According to Deuteronomy Rabbah, Moses and Isaiah were the greatest of the prophets, and yet when they approached God with supplication, both of them were refused.¹⁰⁵ Moses challenged God's judgment. He said, "When I prayed that You forgive Israel their sin of the Golden Calf, you listened. Why do You not listen now that I pray on my own behalf? If You accepted the prayer of one for the sake of many, why do You not accept the many prayers of Israel for the sake of one individual?" Furthermore, Moses reminded God that He was not like a human ruler who must consider the opinion of other rulers when determining a charge.¹⁰⁶ But God would not be moved, because He felt He must set an example for human judges. Because God would not show favor to his dearest Moses, judges must not show favor to sages or leaders when passing judgment.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Sifrei 29:4.

¹⁰⁵ Deuteronomy Rabbah 2:4.

¹⁰⁶ Sifrei 27:2.

¹⁰⁷ Sifrei 29:2.

Moses requested that he be able to enter the land not as a leader, but as a regular Israelite, not as a living being, but only his bones should be brought over the Jordan.¹⁰⁸ God refused every suggestion. However, when Moses asked to see the land from afar, God agreed. God made it so that Moses could see all of the Land of Israel, every tribe. He was also shown things that did not yet exist -- the Temple in Jerusalem, for example.¹⁰⁹ Song of Songs Rabbah adds that God granted Moses' request to be shown all of the future leaders of Israel.¹¹⁰

Moses made light of his sentence, saying, "Many times Israel has committed great sins, and whenever I prayed for them, God immediately answered my prayer...Seeing that I have not sinned from my youth, doesn't it stand to reason that when I pray on my own behalf, God should answer my prayer?" When God saw Moses making light of the situation and that he was not properly engaging in prayer, He sealed the ruling against Moses. Only then did Moses fast, wear sackcloths and ashes, stand inside a small circle and declare, "I will not move from here until You annul that decree." He offered prayer and supplication five hundred and fifteen times (the numerical value of *ve-etchanan*).¹¹¹

Meanwhile, God decreed that every heavenly court refuse Moses' prayers, because the ruling was sealed. The angel Achzeriel was sent to bolt all the gates of every heaven, because Moses' prayer was like a sword which could tear and cut its way through everything, and spare nothing. Moses argued that if God would not withdraw the decree, Israel would think the

¹⁰⁸ Parallel in Sifrei 341:1, variation in Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:10.

¹⁰⁹ Mechilta deRabi Ishmael, Amalek 2.

¹¹⁰ Song of Songs Rabbah 1:10:1.

¹¹¹ Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:10.

Torah which Moses brought to be a fraud. But God would not be moved. The most wicked Samael was waiting every hour for the death of the most righteous Moses, so he could take away his soul. When God sent Sammael, Moses frightened him and said, "You shall not take away my soul." A duel took place between the most wicked and the most righteous. Moses would not surrender even when God said, "Your time of death has come." Only when God promised, "Do not fear, I Myself will attend to you and your burial" did Moses finally surrender. The troops of angels accompanied Moses. Then God kissed Moses, lifting his soul from his body.¹¹²

The earlier Rabbis emphasize the partnership of wills between God and Moses more often than their later counterparts. However, they never pretend that it was an equal partnership. God was still God. His will was final. Moses was human. His will was limited.

Marriage and the Human and Divine Wills

The Rabbis observed daily the interplay of human will and divine will through the success and failure of marriages. During the Rabbinic period it was standard practice for marriages to be arranged by families. However, many midrashim reflect a more mystical view of romance. The idea that matches were fated by God in heaven was widespread. Such a belief was upheld as one more tribute to the greatness of the God, who is able to consider every soul and make proper matches. There is a famous midrash in which a Roman matron learned of God's greatness when she failed at making matches.¹¹³

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ Genesis Rabbah 68:4, Numbers Rabbah 3:6.

The following midrashim will look at the three biblical accounts of husbands and wives finding each other directly or indirectly at wells. The relationships of Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel, Moses and Tziporah all began at wells. These midrashim will explore the extent of God's involvement in forming romantic relationships, as well as the human ability to make choices and act freely.

God as Matchmaker

Here are some of the many midrashim which support the belief that God is ultimately responsible for making matches between men and women. Marriages are made in heaven.¹¹⁴ "And all is revealed and known before God, even the small talk of a man's conversation with his wife."¹¹⁵ "Forty days before a child is formed, a heavenly voice decrees, "So-and-so's daughter shall marry so-and-so."¹¹⁶ "A few days before the birth of a male child, a heavenly voice announces, "A certain woman is destined to become his wife. That house or that field will belong to him."¹¹⁷

Rabbi Akiva is usually a voice in support of free will. However, in Pirke deRabi Eliezer, he is said to have taught, "Anyone who enters a city looking for a wife and finds maidens coming forward, his way will be prosperous. We know this to be the case, because Eliezer, Moses, Jacob, and Saul all found maidens before they even entered the city."¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ Yerushalmi Bezah 5:63a, Genesis Rabbah 68:4, Leviticus Rabbah 8:1, Pesikta deRav Kahana 2:11b-12a, Tanchuma, Ki Tissa 5.

¹¹⁵ Leviticus Rabbah 26:7.

¹¹⁶ Sotah 2a, similar view found in Baba Batra 91b.

¹¹⁷ Moed Katan 18b.

¹¹⁸ Pirke deRabi Eliezer 36.

Isaac and Rebecca

It is taught that the earth shrank for Eliezer and for Jacob when they traveled to seek out mates. Eliezer was able to reach his destination in one day. God would have enabled him to leap the length of the earth in the twinkling of an eye, if it was necessary for his mission to be successful.¹¹⁹ Because the road was shortened for him, Eliezer knew that God willed the match between Isaac and Rebecca.¹²⁰ Pirke deRabi Eliezer specifies that the land contracted either so that Eliezer would not be alone with Rebecca overnight or so that they could reach Abraham's house in time for the *minchah* service.¹²¹

Pirke deRabbi Eliezer repeats Rabbi Akiva's dictum, "All is revealed before God." The example that is given as a proof-text is the story of Rebecca at the well. Because she was a princess, Rebecca never drew water from a well before that day. However, it was fixed that on that particular day, at that particular hour, Rebecca was there to receive Eliezer. All women drew water from wells, but for Rebecca, the water actually leapt into her jug as soon as it saw her. God assured Rebecca that so will it be for her descendants as well.¹²²

Eliezer was one of three who were answered with their questions still on their lips.¹²³ Eliezer was one of three men who made haphazard requests. Two were fortunate and one was not. Eliezer was one of the lucky ones. He declared, "Let the woman to whom I say, 'Let down your pitcher...' and who answers, 'Drink...', let her be the one whom You have decreed for Your

¹¹⁹ Sanhedrin 95a&b, Genesis Rabbah 59:2, Pirke deRabi Eliezer, 16, Tanchuma Yelamdenu, Vayetze 3, Tanchuma Buber, Vayetze 7:8.

¹²⁰ Genesis Rabbah 60:6.

¹²¹ Pirke deRabi Eliezer, Chapter 16.

¹²² Genesis Rabbah 60:3.

¹²³ Ibid.

servant Isaac."¹²⁴ The woman with whom he had such a conversation could easily have been lame or blind. God warned Eliezer, "If a Canaanite slave-girl or harlot had come forward, you would have had to uphold your vow." But Eliezer was fortunate. God answered his prayer and prepared Rebecca for him. It was God's will all along that she become Isaac's wife.¹²⁵

Furthermore, why did Rebecca accept a marriage proposal from a man she had never met before? Because she was destined for Isaac from the time she was in her mother's womb. Laban and Betuel also knew the decisions were God's, therefore, they had no authority to accept or reject the proposal.¹²⁶

Jacob and Rachel

It happened that Laban had no sons. This is why Rachel was out herding the sheep. If he had sons, Jacob never would have found his bride, Rachel.¹²⁷ The implication here is that God even caused Laban to have no sons, so that this moment at the well would happen and Rachel and Jacob would find each other.

According to Pirke deRabi Eliezer, God was manipulating the entire course of events in Haran, so that Jacob and Rachel would meet. Although all of the other shepherds together could not roll away the stone from the well, Jacob managed it alone. Rabbi Chuna adds, "Everything is revealed and foreseen before God." The example given is that before Jacob came to Haran, God plagued Laban's sheep. Rachel was herding the only few remaining

¹²⁴ Genesis 24:14.

¹²⁵ Taanit 4a, Genesis Rabbah 60:3, Leviticus Rabbah 37:4.

¹²⁶ Pirke deRabi Eliezer 16.

¹²⁷ Numbers Rabbah 20:19.

sheep. Laban later recognized the divine intervention and told Jacob, "I have seen through divination that God blesses me for your sake."¹²⁸

Moses and Tziporah

According to some of the Rabbis, God also willed that Moses and Tziporah would become husband and wife. It is taught that when God drew baby Moses out of the water in Egypt, it was already set that years later Jethro would draw him from the well, from the water a second time.¹²⁹

Just as Moses was destined to become the savior of Israel, so was he destined to become Tziporah's husband. The two destinies were intertwined in Moses' fated journey to Jethro. Moses saw in Jethro's garden a rod with the name of God written upon it. Jethro gave it to him and said, "With this will Israel be redeemed from Egypt." Only then did Jethro give Tziporah to be Moses' wife.¹³⁰

Again, the voice in favor of divine providence is heard throughout these selected midrashim. However, it is more dominant in the midrashim produced by the Amoraim of the middle period. The following section will analyze the midrashim which emphasize the free will of the characters at the wells. They present individuals acting independently from and sometimes even counter to God's will.

Men and Women Choose Each Other

¹²⁸ Pirke deRabi Eliezer 36.

¹²⁹ Exodus Rabbah 27:7.

¹³⁰ Pirke deRabi Eliezer 40.

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi teaches that Rebecca was overly-hasty in her love when she hurried to fill her pitcher. He compares her haste to the people of Israel, who are overly-hasty about the coming of the Messianic Age.¹³¹

The following midrashim show how one makes decisions based on another's actions. God reacts in consequence to individual's deeds. He does not will them in advance. For example, Eliezer only asked for as much water as he could drink, therefore God rewarded him by making his mission successful.¹³²

Similarly, Moses devoted his whole soul to justice when he made peace between the shepherds and the seven daughters of Jethro.¹³³ God observed Moses' passion and deeds, and therefore chose Moses to be the one to make peace with Pharaoh by the same kind of dedicated action.¹³⁴

Jethro only showed kindness to Moses as repayment. If Moses had not drawn water for Jethro's daughters as he did, the match between him and Tziporah would never have come to pass.¹³⁵ If Moses had not acted as he did, he would not have been sustained in the desert as he was by Tziporah.¹³⁶

The majority of these midrashim originate from the early Rabbinic periods, although the possibility of free will is considered throughout the middle period as well. The following midrashim will show how human will and divine will intersect at the point of commandment. God dictates His

¹³¹ Leviticus Rabbah 19:5.

¹³² Pesikta deRav Kahana 6:2, Pesikta Rabbati 16:6, Numbers Rabbah 21:20.

¹³³ Mechilta deRabi Ishmael, Shirata 1.

¹³⁴ Pesikta Rabbati 6:2.

¹³⁵ Song of Songs Rabbah 2:5:3.

¹³⁶ Pesikta Rabbati 4:2.

expectations of humankind, but not the fulfillment of those expectations. Only the individual can decide whether or not to link up his will with God's will.

Commandments: The Link between the Human and Divine Wills

Noah's generation did not take care to find suitable mates and procreate. Abraham, however, applied himself to fulfill the commandment, "be fruitful and multiply."¹³⁷ He was determined to find the right wife for Isaac, just as Isaac was determined to find the right wife to Jacob.¹³⁸

Exodus Rabbah provides an example of how one's initiative to do God's will is rewarded with kindness. The well is a symbol of continuity and purity. Moses deliberately adopted the practice of finding a wife at a well from his ancestors. Moses thought that if he imitated their practice, God would show favor to him as He did for Isaac and Jacob.

Moses observed the scene at the well and passed judgment. He thought, "Usually men draw water for women's flocks, but here it is the reversed situation." Rabbi Yochanan teaches in the name of Rabbi Eleazar the son of Rabbi Yosi the Galilean that the male shepherds had in fact come to rape Jethro's daughters and cast them into the well. Moses saved them from drowning and drew water for them, just as Jacob had done for Rachel. When the daughters told their father what had happened, Jethro knew that the mysterious savior must be a descendent of Jacob, whose behavior was so similar. "Why did you leave him? Perhaps he will marry one of you!" Tziporah ran like a bird (wordplay) and brought him back to her father's

¹³⁷ Genesis 1:28.

¹³⁸ Tanchuma Buber, Noah 2:18, Tanchuma Yelamdenu, Noah 12.

house. They named their son Gershom, because although Moses was a stranger in a foreign country, even there God caused him to prosper.¹³⁹

Jethro also chose to fulfill God's commandments. He understood the expectations of treating the stranger with kindness. Because Jethro showed hospitality to Moses, God rewarded him with Moses as a son-in-law.¹⁴⁰ So too were Jethro's descendants rewarded because of the kindness he showed to Moses.¹⁴¹

The final example of the human and divine wills meeting at commandment comes later in the biblical story of the exodus. Moses ruled that a certain woman was forbidden from marrying a particular man. The man, of course, was angry and argued with Moses, saying, "But your wife is Midianite!" Moses was so shocked by this insult that he could find no proper response. The midrash ends with a lesson, warning all to choose God's will with confidence. "This comes to teach that one must be as fierce as a leopard, swift as an eagle, fleet as a hart, and strong as a lion in order to carry out the will of his Father in Heaven."¹⁴²

Conclusions

While chapter two focuses on the interplay between human nature and providence, this collection of midrashim is interested in understanding how personal destinies are determined. Certain biblical stories are founded on the basic power struggle between God and His human creation. The

¹³⁹ Exodus Rabbah 1:32-33.

¹⁴⁰ Sanhedrin 103b, Leviticus Rabbah 34:8, Song of Songs Rabbah 2:5:3.

¹⁴¹ Tanchuma Yelamdenu, Yitro 4.

¹⁴² Numbers Rabbah 20:25 quoting Yehuda ben Tema's teaching in Pirke Avot 5:23.

Rabbis' interpretations of these stories in particular hint at their own understanding of where God ends His control and the human will takes over.

The Rabbis of the Tanaitic and early Amoraic periods have a great appreciation for the singled-out nature of the prophet. Uncharacteristic of most of their literature, these early rabbis offer many midrashim in support of the predestination of prophets. Although they believe the prophets to be unique and chosen by God, they resist the idea that God dictates the details of their lives. The Rabbis of the middle Amoraic period, however, express their belief that God intercedes in a series of moments in the lives of the prophets. In order to ensure His plan, God manipulates people's thoughts and deeds, and even the existence of inanimate objects. This is not to say that the early rabbis did not believe God could intercede to dictate one's personal destiny, merely that God does not choose to do so.

Another trend emerges from the midrashim which study God's relationship with Moses. Throughout the rabbinic period the authors of midrashim agree that God was clearly the senior partner and Moses was the assistant. However, the earlier Rabbis tend to hold the partnership up as one of intimacy and mutual respect. Moses made his differing opinions known, and God listened. When Moses resisted God's call to service, God rejected his pleas, but first listened patiently for seven days. In contrast, the later Rabbis show a greater distance between God and Moses. God refused to even hear Moses' petitions. Moses was more fearful of God's strict judgment. His will was no match for God's. Likewise, according to the Amoraim of the middle period, God would not even consider the opposing wills of Jeremiah or Jonah.

As chapter two concludes, here, too, it becomes clear that the Rabbis' ideal is for the human will and the divine will to be one and the same,

because each partner chooses to enter the partnership. When the relationship is established on the foundation of working towards a common goal, then both God and the individual can have expectations of each other. Each party responds to the other's actions and can offer guidance.

The case of Moses at the Waters of Meribah causes the human and divine wills, which had been working side by side, to split. There is not one midrash which teaches that God directly caused Moses to strike the rock or insult Israel. However, throughout the Rabbinic period, many midrashim support the possibility that God caused other events to unfold, and therefore indirectly determined the sinful act. The Rabbis of the middle Amoraic period tend to write more of these kind of midrashim.

The earlier Rabbis, in contrast, want to maintain the uniqueness of Moses' relationship with God. They must, therefore, construct more complex explanations for the scene at the Waters of Meribah. Some more convincing than others, the midrashim they offer tend to present Moses acting freely according to his will. He is the author of his personal destiny.

Where destiny and romance are concerned, there is not a significant differentiation between the two time periods. The few midrashim that favor the possibility of free will are mostly produced by the earlier rabbis. However, the midrashim which depict a God who destines marriages come out of the earlier period as often as from the middle Amoraic period. Because marriages were arranged throughout the rabbinic period it is not surprising that free will was not considered to be significantly involved in finding a husband or wife.

Chapter Four -- Political Destiny

God and Politics: A Rabbinic View

When Moses asked God for His name, He answered, "I will be what I will be."¹ Rabbi Yochanan teaches that this name comes to show how God acts and reacts differently with individuals than He does with the masses of humankind. God is merciful to individuals, but rules over the masses by ruling against their desires and wills, "even though they break their teeth trying to fulfill God's will."² This is a critical distinction for this study. The Rabbis consider two separate and very different systems co-existing between God and humanity. On one level, God allows individuals more freedom and is more patient when they error. Simultaneously, when humanity as a whole or even distinct peoples are concerned, on the contrary, God is strict and involves Himself to ensure the fulfillment of the fate He has determined for them. Rabina uses strong language to make this point clear, when he says, "The Holy One, blessed be He anticipates political events by an oath."³

"When Israel does God's will, they add to God's power. When Israel does not do God's will, they, if it is possible to say, weaken the great power of God on high."⁴ Isaiah prophesied, "You are my witnesses, says the Lord, and I am God."⁵ The Rabbis add, "When you are my witnesses I am God, and when you are not my witnesses I am, as if it were possible to say, not God."⁶

¹ Exodus 3:14

² Exodus Rabbah 3:6.

³ Sanhedrin 94b.

⁴ Pesikta deRav Kahana 166a-b, Lamentations Rabbah 15a, col. 2.

⁵ Isaiah 43:12.

⁶ Sifre 144a, Pesikta deRav Kahana 102b, Tanchuma Buber 255a.

Humankind, according to the Rabbis, could actually increase and decrease the stature and strength of God, depending on its actions.

Of course the Rabbis were most concerned with God's involvement in the political destiny of their own people. Tractate Megillah expounds on Psalms to explain God's role in Israel's political history. "You have caused men to ride over our heads, we went through fire and through water."⁷ "Through fire" is taught to refer to the days of Nebuchadnezzar and "through water" refers to the days of Pharaoh. They are quick to emphasize evidence of God's favor for Israel by adding, "But God brought us into abundance in the days of Haman."⁸

The Rabbis usually understand political suffering to be strict, but necessary punishment from God for the sins of Israel. Unfortunately, the only hope they can find is in their fantasies of the world to come, in which God will release Israel from all of its suffering and bring proper punishment to the nations which have oppressed them. For example, it is taught that in the future, the fire of Israel will consume all the nations, which are nothing but thorns and thistles in this world.⁹

The least God can do for Israel in this world is to make sure that the hardships they suffer are respected by the nations of the world. According to Mechilta deRabi Ishmael, "God made sure that every nation or tongue which subjugated Israel ruled from one end of the world to the other for the sake of the honor of Israel." Although it is hard to imagine that anyone can take

⁷ Psalms 66:12.

⁸ Megillah 11a.

⁹ Pirke deRabi Eliezer 40 makes reference to Isaiah 33:12.

comfort in this idea, the Rabbis consider suffering to be somehow less humiliating if the oppressors are a mighty empire.¹⁰

According to some, these wicked empires were destined since the beginning of creation to rule over Israel. Either Rabbi Menachem or Rabbi Tanchuma in the name of Rabbi Joshua ben Levi teaches that God would "make the people of the world drink a cup of bitterness from where a river began in the Garden of Eden...Four kingdoms were predestined to flow from the four rivers which originated in Eden. They are Babylon, Media, Greece, and Edom. All of these kingdoms enrich and adorn themselves at Israel's expense and of course, they persecute Israel as well."¹¹

Four cases are considered here in order to understand the Rabbis' views on free will and providence in the politics of Israel. Each biblical account offers a unique model for the Rabbis to ponder. In the case of Pharaoh, the Torah states clearly that God manipulated Pharaoh's emotions, so that the story of Israel's exodus from Egypt would be dramatic enough to prove God's tremendous power. In the case of Bilaam, the Torah states clearly that God manipulated the words of Bilaam. Bilaam intended to curse Israel, and instead a blessing was miraculously uttered. Nowhere in the Megillah of Esther is God mentioned. Therefore, the Rabbis are not forced by the text to accept that God was involved at all. Even so, they voluntarily choose to teach how God determined the course of events in Persia. The Covenant between the Pieces is one of the many biblical accounts of God's predicting future events. The Rabbis struggle to understand why God would

¹⁰ *Mechilta deRabi Ishmael*, Beshalach 2

¹¹ *Genesis Rabbah* 16:4; Tanchuma Buber, *Toledot* 6:10 teaches that the four kingdoms are referred to in *Genesis* 27:1ff.

determine a fate of hundreds of years of suffering for His people. In addition, this case is problematic, because Israel is brought out of Egypt sooner than God originally decreed. The Rabbis, therefore, must also strive to understand why it is that God would make such a prediction and then not see it fulfilled.

Pharaoh King of Egypt

The Rabbis often use the story of Pharaoh as a paradigm for God's involvement in the unfolding of human history. God told Moses, "In this world I will obtain retribution from the Egyptians through the ten plagues, but in the future I will obtain retribution for you from Gog and Magog.¹² The ten plagues which befell Pharaoh and Egypt will also be the punishments inflicted on Edom.¹³ Therefore, the Rabbis are compelled to study the story of Pharaoh in order to better understand God's ways in determining human history in general.

Pharaoh as an agent of Divine Providence: *"But the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he would not heed them, just as the Lord had told Moses" (Exodus 9:12).*

At least some of the Rabbis have trouble with the notion that God could manipulate an individual's emotions. But the authors of Mechilta deRabi Ishmael respond clearly. They warn that one should not think for a moment that Pharaoh hardened his own heart.¹⁴ The Torah includes particular language to specify, "God hardened Pharaoh's heart."¹⁵ Similarly,

¹² Tanchuma Yelamdenu, Vayera 10.

¹³ Mechilta deRabi Ishmael, Tanchuma Yelamdenu, Bo 4, Tanchuma Yelamdenu, Vayera 13.

¹⁴ Mechilta deRabi Ishmael, Pesacha 8, Tanchuma Yelamdenu, Bo 13.

¹⁵ Exodus 9:12.

it is argued that God hardened the world in order to create it. Surely, He can harden the heart of Pharaoh.¹⁶

Others search the text for hints that this could have been a case of both free will and divine providence. In reference to the first five plagues, the words, "Pharaoh's heart was hardened" are written. However, after the fifth plague occurred and he still would not permit them to leave, the Holy One, blessed be He said, "Henceforth, even if he desires to send them away, I will not allow it." Therefore, with reference to the last five plagues, it is written, "But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart."¹⁷ This midrash indicates that Pharaoh was allowed the human capacity for change. It is unclear, however, whether or not the Rabbis believe Pharaoh did in fact change his feelings on the matter. He had gone one step too far, insulted God, and lost his chance to repent or to prove that he could reform.

"A rod for the back of fools"¹⁸ refers to Pharaoh and the Egyptians, who only after they were consumed by plagues, set Israel free against their will. Pharaoh regrets letting Israel go, because he wanted to be known as a man who kept his word, one who would not set them free, even if it meant he would be slain. Immediately after letting them go, Pharaoh began to cry.¹⁹

The implication here is that God took control of Pharaoh's emotions only for a critical moment, causing him to decide to let Israel go "against his will." Immediately thereafter, God resumed His more removed position from human history. And Pharaoh, with deep regret, realized what he was forced to do.

¹⁶ Exodus Rabbah 13:1.

¹⁷ Tanchuma Yelamdenu, Vayera 3.

¹⁸ Proverbs 26:3.

¹⁹ Exodus Rabbah 20:1.

Even Pharaoh's magicians recognized God's active role in Israel's political destiny. They said to Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God,"²⁰ implying this is the finger which is destined to punish Sennacherib.²¹ Rabbi Chama ben Rabbi Chanina teaches that Pharaoh's astrologers could access God's will for the future, but could not understand it.²²

There is a handful of midrashim which claims that God intervened only because Pharaoh was indecisive. Pharaoh could not make up his mind whether or not to pursue Israel, so God made the decision for him.²³ Furthermore, God deceived the Egyptians and controlled their destiny. When they chased Israel into the sea, they realized they were doomed. They wanted to turn back, but God made it so they could find no avenue of escape and they continued to run towards the sea until they sank into the depths.²⁴ According to these midrashim, God prefers a history which moves forward in one direction. He has limited patience for human waffling which only complicates His plan.

Apparently, such indecisiveness can be enough of a reason for grave punishment. Formerly, Pharaoh's servants did not agree with his personal desire to keep Israel in Egypt. They said, "How long shall this man be a snare for us? Let the men go."²⁵ However, Pharaoh later heard that the hearts of his servants had turned as did his. A parable makes the comparison to a man who instructed his slave to buy him a fish from the marketplace. The slave

²⁰ Exodus 8:14.

²¹ Sanhedrin 95b.

²² Sanhedrin 101b, Sotah 12a.

²³ Mechilta deRabi Ishmael, Bechalach 2, Tanchuma Yelamdenu, Beshalach 6.

²⁴ Exodus Rabbah 15:15.

²⁵ Exodus 10:7.

returned with a foul-smelling fish. The man said, "You must eat the fish, take one hundred lashes, or pay one hundred *manah*." The slave began to eat the fish, but he could not finish it. He began to take the lashes, but after sixty, he could not stand any more. He said, "I will pay the one hundred *manah*." In the end, he ate the fish, suffered the lashes, and paid the *manah*. So it was for the Egyptians. They were plagued, they let Israel go, and their money was taken from them.²⁶ Pharaoh's indecisiveness led to his downfall.

Some believe that God did not only manipulate the heart of Pharaoh, but the hearts of all of Egypt. During the three days of darkness, the Holy One, blessed be He caused the Egyptians to feel kindly towards Israel and they loaned them many things.²⁷ Others suggest that God did not touch the hearts of the Egyptians, but intervened in miraculous ways in order to determine Israel's success.

When an Israelite would enter an Egyptian's home to borrow utensils or gold, or garments, they would reply, "We have nothing to loan you." Whereupon the Holy One, blessed be He would illumine their dwellings, and the Israelites would say to them, "There it is, in that place." This happened in order to fulfill the verse, "And afterwards shall they come out with great substance."²⁸

It is not surprising that the midrashim which describe the hardening of Pharaoh's heart as an act of pure providence tend to come from the Rabbis of the middle Amoraic period. Mechilta deRabi Ishmael, an earlier collection of midrashim, expresses the same position. However, the voice in favor of divine providence is heard more frequently throughout the centuries that follow.

²⁶ Mechilta deRabi Ishmael, Beshalach 2.

²⁷ Tanchuma Yelamdenu, Vayera 14.

²⁸ Tanchuma Yelamdenu, Veyera 14 based on Genesis 15:14.

Pharaoh's Free Will: *"But Pharaoh's heart was hardened this time also, and he would not let the people go (Exodus 8:28).*

"I spoke with my own heart."²⁹ The human heart is very complex. It sees. It hears. It speaks. It walks. It falls. It stands. It rejoices. It cries. It is comforted. It is troubled. It becomes hard, as it is said, "The Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh."³⁰ Therefore, Pharaoh spoke with his own heart, saying, "Lo, I have gotten great wisdom."³¹ It seems this statement has chosen a self-contradicting proof-text.³² Perhaps it suggests that the situation which God constructed caused Pharaoh's heart to harden, but that Pharaoh reacted to it and spoke independently. God did not put some kind of a spell on Pharaoh's heart, so he would feel a certain way. Only indirectly did God cause Pharaoh's emotional state.

Exodus Rabbah agrees when it teaches that God warned Pharaoh indirectly through Moses. However, because of the wicked ways of the Egyptian people, they chose to pay no heed.³³ The first plague made no impression on Pharaoh. Therefore, in order to move him, God had to bring more and more severe plagues.³⁴

In contrast, it is taught that Pharaoh hardened his own heart after the first three plagues. However, he wanted to change his ways, but he could not, because he was caught in his own pattern of wicked behavior. So God helped

²⁹ Ecclesiastes 1:16.

³⁰ Exodus 9:12.

³¹ Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:16:1.

³² Exodus 9:12.

³³ Exodus Rabbah 12:5.

³⁴ Exodus Rabbah 9:11.

him by making the fourth plague even more unbearable, so that Pharaoh might be able to reform.³⁵

A strong statement is made to describe the extent of Pharaoh's independent will. Pharaoh made it a habit to get up early in the morning in order to "plan his heart." He wanted to make his own decisions before Moses would come to bring plagues upon him, because "the plagues caused Pharaoh's heart to go this way or that." However, God saw Pharaoh's plan and instructed Moses to get up even earlier than Pharaoh.³⁶

Another natural explanation for the hardening of Pharaoh's heart is described in the following midrash. Moses and Aaron were afraid that God would be angry at them for altering His words when they told Pharaoh, "Thus said the Lord, the God of Israel,"³⁷ and for that reason Pharaoh became hardened against God. Therefore, Moses and Aaron returned to Pharaoh and said, "The God of the Hebrews has met with us."³⁸ Moses and Aaron chose to alter God's carefully planned words. They referred to Israel as a nation. Pharaoh insisted that they were merely a people distinct by language only, and therefore subject to oppression. Pharaoh became infuriated with the God of the Hebrews and looked forward to a duel.

Many midrashim spring from the dramatic moment when Pharaoh finally let Israel go and then decided to chase after them. It is taught that Pharaoh was so determined to retrieve Israel that with his own hands, he readied his chariot to chase after them.³⁹ Exodus Rabbah teaches that the

³⁵ Exodus Rabbah 11:2.

³⁶ Exodus Rabbah 11:1.

³⁷ Exodus 5:1.

³⁸ Tanchuma Yelamdenu, Vayera 6 based on Exodus 5:3.

³⁹ Mechilta deRabi Ishmael, Beshalach 2.

wicked cry when they are in trouble, but then return to their wickedness as soon as they are relieved of their suffering. So it was for Pharaoh. When he and all of Egypt suffered the devastation of the tenth plague, they cried out for mercy. But as soon as the punishment was lifted, they were determined to bring Israel back to slavery.⁴⁰

Another explanation describes the Egyptians' change of heart to be natural rather than supernatural. God did not cause their hearts to harden. Rather it was a matter of free will. The hearts of the Egyptians turned, because as soon as Israel was gone, they realized they had no authority, no one to rule. They chased after Israel for their own purpose, their own need for power.⁴¹

Neither did Pharaoh realize the value of precious Israel, until they were gone. After their escape, his deep regret moved him to chase after Israel.⁴² Pharaoh's servants asked him, "Hasn't much good come to us on their account?" Rabbi Yosi the Galilean offers the following parable. They are compared to a man who sold his inherited land for a trifle. The buyer opened wells on the land, planted gardens, trees, and orchards in it. The seller saw this and began to choke with grief. So it was for the Egyptians, who let Israel go without realizing what they gave up.⁴³ It was not God who hardened their hearts. Their own feelings of regret moved Pharaoh and the Egyptians to chase after Israel.

Exodus Rabbah offers a much more heartfelt explanation, which paints Pharaoh in an unusually good light. Pharaoh said, "When Israel was with

⁴⁰ Exodus Rabbah 10:6.

⁴¹ Mechilta deRabi Ishmael, Beshalach 2.

⁴² Exodus Rabbah 20:15.

⁴³ Mechilta deRabi Ishmael, Beshalach 2. A similar parable by Rabbi Simon bar Yochai is told here. Another version is found in Exodus Rabbah 20:2, and another in 20:5.

me, God had need of me and I enjoyed His respect, and He sent me a letter almost every hour, saying, "Let My people go!" As long as Pharaoh heard Moses demanding, "Let my people go!" he refused to let them go. But when God Himself came to Egypt and brought Israel out, then Pharaoh began to wail. God is compared to a king, whose son had gone to stay at a certain rich man's house in a far off country. The rich man had welcomed the prince very warmly. When the king heard, he sent many letters to the man, saying, "Let my son go." The rich man did not respond until finally the king came to his house and brought the prince out. The man began to wail for the loss of the prince. His neighbors asked, "Why are you crying?" "Because as long as the prince was with me, I had great honor, for the king addressed letters to me. Because he needed something from me, I enjoyed his respect. But now that his son is gone, he does not need me for anything. This is why I lament." This was also what Pharaoh said, "When Israel was with me, God had need of me and I enjoyed His respect. He sent me a letter almost every hour. Finally He came Himself to Egypt and took Israel out."⁴⁴

Such a contrast indicates the conflicting ways the Rabbis view the enemies of Israel. Oftentimes the Rabbis view the enemies of Israel as villains worthy of punishment, but still very human. Other times, the Rabbis view the enemies of Israel as a kind of threat to God's position as Ruler. The next sections will further analyze these two views.

God punished Pharaoh for his Acts of Free Will:

"You shall soon see what I will do to Pharaoh" (Exodus 6:1).

God passed judgment and determined that Pharaoh's acts of free will were deserving of punishment. "Pharaoh was the first to sin, and therefore,

⁴⁴ Exodus Rabbah 20:7.

the first to be punished. How much the more so, is the first one to fulfill God's will, the first to be rewarded?"⁴⁵

The following midrashim teach that Pharaoh was punished, not because he challenged God's position, but because of how he treated Israel, God's people. Ecclesiastes 10:8 warns, "He who digs a pit shall fall into it." The Rabbis suggest this alludes to the wicked Pharaoh. Because he threw the Israelite sons into the river, he was tossed into the sea.⁴⁶ The Holy One, blessed be He warned Pharaoh about his punishment in advance. He said, "Because you drowned My children in the river, so will you be cast in to the sea to perish. Your daughter, however, (because of the kindness she showed towards Moses), I will take her and cause her to inherit Paradise."⁴⁷

God confided in Moses that He would harden Pharaoh's heart in order to have many opportunities to exact retribution from Israel's oppressors. He revealed to Moses early on that Pharaoh would not let Israel go free until the tenth plague. This would provide God with greater opportunities to oppress Egypt. Israel is the first-born of the Holy One blessed be He. It is only fitting, therefore, that He would withhold the first-borns of Egypt.⁴⁸

Rabbi Sirneon ben Lakish teaches that even though Israel was redeemed, God was not comforted. He is compared to a king whose son was taken captive by barbarians. They subjected the prince to very harsh treatment. Eventually the king saved his son from their hands, but he would not be comforted until he enslaved the barbarians as they had enslaved his

⁴⁵ Mechilta deRabi Ishmael, Beshalach 2, paralleled in Pesach 7, Sifre 18:1, and Tanchuma Yelamdenu, Beshalach 6.

⁴⁶ Ecclesiastes Rabbah 10:8:1, Midrash Tehillim 1:14 on Psalm 9.

⁴⁷ Exodus Rabbah 20:4 and 10.

⁴⁸ Exodus Rabbah 5:7.

son. Similarly, God said, "I will not be comforted until I throw them into the sea."⁴⁹

Tanchuma Yelamdenu suggests that God involved Himself for Moses' sake in particular. When Moses left Pharaoh's presence, the wicked Pharaoh said, "If that son of Amram comes near me again, I will slay him, I will hang him, I will burn him." That is why when Moses returned, Pharaoh became like a rod. God hardened his entire body, to save Moses' life.⁵⁰

The following midrash stands out from the rest. It suggests that God hardened Pharaoh's heart not for Israel's sake, or Moses' sake, but for the sake of God's own needs. It was taught in the school of Rabbi Ishmael that when Israel went forth from Egypt God caused Israel to resemble a dove caught between a hawk and a serpent. God wanted to hear their cry for help as He had before they left Egypt, but as soon as they were free, they were no longer willing to cry out for help. Therefore, God hardened Pharaoh's heart, causing him to pursue them. Through Pharaoh, God brought Israel near to repentance. They lifted up their eyes toward heaven and cried out to God for help as they had in Egypt.⁵¹ Many commentaries suggest that God intervenes in history in order to move humanity towards a goal He has set. This commentary suggests that a critical part of God's ultimate plan is for Israel to maintain a particular relationship with Him no matter the political situation. Such a message was central for the Rabbis.

The Rabbis wonder how God wants His people to treat the wicked kings who rule over them on earth. Rabbi Yochanan teaches that God said to Moses about Pharaoh, "He is a wicked man, therefore, you should be insolent

⁴⁹ Exodus Rabbah 20: 12-14.

⁵⁰ Tanchuma Yelamdenu, Vayera 3.

⁵¹ Song of Songs Rabbah 2:14:2, Exodus Rabbah 20:12.

towards him." In contradiction, Resh Lakish teaches that The Holy One, blessed be He told Moses, "Pharaoh is a king and you must show him reverence."⁵² Surely the Rabbis, who were the leadership of their communities, often debated how they should approach those who governed over them.

The Clash of the Wills: God responds to Pharaoh as a Threat to His Kingship

"But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, that I may multiply My signs and marvels in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 7:3).

Pharaoh was caught in a power struggle with God. Many midrashim build on the assumption that Pharaoh was determined to prove he was the lord of the universe. For this reason alone did he choose to inflict suffering upon Israel. And for this reason alone did God bring him down from his throne.

Pharaoh asked, "Who is this God?" The Hebrew word for "who," *mi*, is equal to fifty in gematria, therefore, God sent fifty plagues to Egypt to prove His Kingship. Others suggest that when the spelling of *mi* is reversed, the word *yam*, "sea" results. And therefore, the only fitting punishment for the God-denying Pharaoh was to be drowned in the sea.⁵³

Pharaoh made himself out to be a god. The Holy One blessed be He set out to prove Pharaoh to be human, by proving his heart to be only human, capable of manipulation and swaying emotion.⁵⁴ There is an amusing midrash which comes to show how far Pharaoh went to hide his mortality. It is taught that Pharaoh sneaked out early every morning, so no one would see

⁵² Zevachim 102a. There is a debate here over which Rabbi held which opinion.

⁵³ Exodus Rabbah 5:14.

⁵⁴ Exodus Rabbah 8:2.

that he had to relieve himself like all human beings. But, of course, Moses caught him in the act.⁵⁵

A Tanna taught in the name of Rabbi Joshua ben Karcha: "Pharaoh, who personally blasphemed God, was punished by the Holy One blessed be He, in Person.⁵⁶ The Holy One blessed be He scolded Pharaoh, saying, "Wretch! With the very expression that tells of your stubbornness (*kabed*), I will glorify Myself (*mitkabed*) over you."⁵⁷

According to the Rabbis, God battled against the Egyptian gods. He needed to prove His greatness, not just to Pharaoh, but to all of Egypt. What caused the Egyptians to be smitten by such a succession of plagues? The fact that they trusted their idols. So God smote their gods together with them. The wooden idols rotted and the metal ones melted...It does not say "Pharaoh" pursued Israel, but "Egypt." This comes to teach that the Guardian Angel of Egypt pursued Israel.⁵⁸ The story of the exodus from Egypt is a story of a battle between the gods.

Exodus Rabbah teaches that despite His efforts, God realized that the Egyptians were not capable of recognizing His Kingship. The Holy One, blessed be He began to harden Pharaoh's heart out of anger. Each of the five warnings God sent were met with nothing but resistance, so He closed their hearts to repentance altogether. It was no longer possible for the Egyptians to return to God. From that point on, only punishment could relieve them of their sins.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Exodus Rabbah 9:8.

⁵⁶ Sanhedrin 94a.

⁵⁷ Tanchuma Yelamdenu, Vayera 12.

⁵⁸ Exodus Rabbah 15:15.

⁵⁹ Exodus Rabbah 13:3.

The Rabbis are no strangers to tyrannical kings. They never deny the very real power of Pharaoh. However, they are assured that God's will could ultimately overpower any opposing human will. "Whenever Pharaoh made a command and God did not, Pharaoh's command was fulfilled. However, as soon as God made a command, Pharaoh's words were broken."⁶⁰ God said to Pharaoh after Israel was released, "Whose words are fulfilled – yours or Mine?" Bilaam said "God let them go."⁶¹ However, Exodus 13:17 says, "Pharaoh let them go." This comes to teach that Pharaoh escorted them out and pleaded that he be blessed.⁶² But God actually brought them out of Egypt.⁶³

Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish teaches, "It can be compared to two prize-fighters, one of whom was stronger than the other. The stronger prevailed over the weaker and then placed a garland on his own head. Was it not the weaker who caused the stronger to receive the garland? Likewise was it not Pharaoh, whom He overthrew, that caused God to take praise and glory."⁶⁴

When God punishes the nations of the world, His name becomes renowned in the world, as it is written in Isaiah 66:19: "And I will work a sign among them, and I will send such an escape of them unto the nations." God declared to the Egyptians that Israel would flee in order that they would pursue them, be drowned in the sea, and be witnesses to God's greatness.⁶⁵

Woe unto the wicked who are mere worms that perish
from the earth, but who seek to frustrate God's word! God

⁶⁰ Esther Rabbah 7:22.

⁶¹ Numbers 23:22.

⁶² Exodus 12:32.

⁶³ Exodus Rabbah 20:3.

⁶⁴ Exodus Rabbah 21:11.

⁶⁵ Exodus Rabbah 29:5 and a similar theme is taken up in Exodus Rabbah 23:9.

said to Pharaoh, "You said, 'I will not let them go', but I say, 'Let My people go.'⁶⁶ Well, we will see whose word will be fulfilled and whose annulled." The end was that Pharaoh arose of his own accord and fell at the feet of Moses and said to the Israelites, "Rise up. Go forth."⁶⁷ And then God said to him, "Well, Pharaoh, whose words have been fulfilled, yours or Mine?"⁶⁸

Surprisingly, there are some midrashim which read into the text that Pharaoh learned his lesson and came to believe in the one God. For example, before the plagues, Pharaoh said, "Who is the Lord that I should hearken to His voice and let Israel go?"⁶⁹ However, after he was smitten, he said, "The Lord is righteous."⁷⁰

Exodus Rabbah depicts a very different Pharaoh than does the Torah. Here is another midrash which shows Pharaoh as a sympathetic character, who eventually wanted to repent and to make his will harmonious with God's will. Pharaoh was finally convinced of the Oneness of God, but his situation did not allow him to announce his "change of heart." His environment still dictated his circumstance, even though he wanted to reform. For example, Pharaoh had to leave his palace to pray to the One God, because his palace was filled with idols.⁷¹

On the other hand, it is taught that Pharaoh saw how near Israel had come to repentance. He saw how near he was to retribution. And he saw what was to befall him. Despite all the evidence of God's greatness, he

⁶⁶ Exodus 9:1.

⁶⁷ Exodus 12:31.

⁶⁸ Exodus Rabbah 20:3.

⁶⁹ Exodus 5:2.

⁷⁰ Mishnah Yadaim 4:8 based on Exodus 9:27.

⁷¹ Exodus Rabbah 11:1.

immediately went and offered sacrifices and burned incense and poured libations before his idols.⁷²

From the midrashim which are recorded here, it can be noted that the interpretations from the Tanaim and early Amoraim tend to explain that God's intervention to be for the sake of punishing Pharaoh's wicked acts of free will. In contrast, the interpretations from the Amoraim of the middle period tend to explain God's intervention was motivated by His need to re-establish His position as Ruler of the Universe. The later Rabbis seem to be more politically minded, while the earlier Rabbis view even global politics through a lens of individual relationships with God.

Bilaam son of Beor

The story of Bilaam includes unusual miracles. The Rabbis are not surprised that God **can** perform such miracles, only that God **does** perform such miracles. Therefore, they provide many interpretations to try to understand the talking donkey, for example. This study is only interested in the Rabbis' responses to how Bilaam could intend to say one thing, and actually say just the opposite.

The Rabbis attribute a great deal of power to the story of Bilaam. Some consider Bilaam to be a turning point in human history. Numbers Rabbah teaches that before Bilaam's words, people led innocent lives. For example, it was safe for Rachel to herd her father's sheep alone without fear. However, after Bilaam, the world became dangerous and people became lewd.⁷³

Because Bilaam witnessed God's anger firsthand, the Rabbis believe Bilaam determined the precise length of the moment it takes for God's anger

⁷² Tanchuma Yelamdenu 8.

⁷³ Numbers Rabbah 20:9.

to pass. God said to Israel, "If I had been angry for one moment, not one remnant of Israel would be left." Some say that Bilaam determined that a moment of God's anger lasts one hundred, fifty-eight thousand, eight hundred, and eighty-eighths of an hour. Others say a moment of God's anger lasts as long as it takes to say *rega*.⁷⁴

One amusing indication of how powerful the Rabbis consider Bilaam's words to have been is how they reuse his words to combat their own superstitions. They suggest, "If a dog, a palm tree, or a woman (others add a swine or a snake) pass between two men, the remedy to keep them from harm is to recite Bilaam's words, recorded in Numbers 23:19 or 23:22."⁷⁵

The Rabbis attribute more than just strange incantations and prophecies to Bilaam. Just as they did for Pharaoh's story, the Rabbis provide a range of interpretations of Bilaam's story and God's role in it. Some support the possibility of divine providence. Others support the possibility of free will. And still others offer a combination thereof. But first, the Rabbis establish how Bilaam's function as prophet of God was different from those discussed in chapter three. How does the will of a heathen prophet less closely resemble the will of God, or does it? How does God use the enemies of Israel to advance His plan, or does He?

Bilaam's Prophecy

What are the differences between the prophets of Israel and the prophets of the nations? Rabbi Chana ben Chaninah teaches that the Holy One blessed be He revealed Himself fully to the prophets of Israel, but

⁷⁴ Berachot 7a. A similar comment is found in Avodah Zarah 4a-b and Sanhedrin 105b.

⁷⁵ Pesachim 111a.

incompletely to the prophets of the nations. For example, Bilaam only received God's half-speech in Numbers 23:4. Rabbi Issachar of Kefar Mandi teaches that the communication between God and the heathen prophets was unclean, but the communication between God and Israelite prophets was as holy, pure, and clean as the communication between God and the angels. Rabbi Ilai ben Menachem teaches that God was distant from the wicked, but close to the righteous. God appeared to wicked prophets only at night, but to Israel's prophets by the light of day.⁷⁶

Rabbi Chaninah bar Papa and the Rabbis give related parables. Rabbi Chaninah tells the story of a king who spoke to strangers through a curtain, but to friends he spoke face to face. The Rabbis compared God to a king who had a wife and a concubine. When he went to be with his wife, he went openly, but when he went to be with the concubine, he went in secret. Similarly, God spoke to the prophets of Israel during the daytime, but would only communicate with the heathen prophets in the dark of night – for example to Bilaam in Numbers 22:20.⁷⁷

There was no other prophet like Moses among Israel. However, according to Numbers Rabbah, there was another like him among the nations. Bilaam was his name. God planned it this way so that the nations of the world could not say, "We would have believed in God, if we had a prophet like Moses." This way, they had no excuse.⁷⁸

Moses and Bilaam were different, however. Numbers Rabbah continues to explain that Moses stood up on his feet to receive prophecy, while Bilaam had to sit on the ground. Moses spoke directly, mouth to

⁷⁶ Genesis Rabbah 52:5, Genesis Rabbah 74:7, Leviticus Rabbah 1:13, parallel found in Tanchuma Buber, Vayishlach 8:24.

⁷⁷ Genesis Rabbah 52:5, Genesis Rabbah 74:7, Leviticus Rabbah 1:13.

⁷⁸ Numbers Rabbah 14:20.

mouth, with God, while Bilaam did not. Moses spoke face to face with God, while Bilaam spoke only in parables with God. Moses did not know who was speaking to him, because the words were too lofty for him to comprehend. Bilaam, on the other hand, knew who was speaking to him. Moses did not know when God would speak to him. Bilaam did. Moses did not know what God would talk about, but Bilaam did. He was like a cook who knew what the king would have on his table and how much it cost. Bilaam spoke with God whenever he wanted, while the Rabbis debate whether or not Moses did speak with God whenever he wanted to.⁷⁹

It is interesting that the Rabbis describe Bilaam to have actually received a purer prophecy than Moses. It is taught, however, that wisdom can be dangerous. Bilaam is an example of one who gained wisdom and was harmed by it. He heard the word of God and was slain because of it.⁸⁰ In contrast, God was careful to protect Moses from knowing too much.

Rabbi Isaac taught that before the Tabernacle was built, prophecy was current among the heathen nations, but not after. Bilaam was the only exception, because his prophecy was for the good of Israel.⁸¹

Bilaam as an agent of Divine Providence:

"I can only repeat faithfully what the Lord puts in my mouth" (Numbers 23:12).

The following midrash attempts to explain God's motivation for altering Bilaam's words. According to Numbers Rabbah, it was in order to fulfill the promise He made to Jacob. Jacob's blessing – that he should be like

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Exodus Rabbah 31:3.

⁸¹ Leviticus Rabbah 1:12, Song of Songs Rabbah 2:3:5.

the dust of the earth – was finally fulfilled in the days of Bilaam. For Bilaam said, "Who has counted the dust of Jacob?"⁸²

Tanchuma Yelamdenu teaches that normally, free will is given to human beings. With it they can decide whether to use their mouths for sacred purposes or for evil. However, when God wants to take control over a person's mouth, He will do so. Bilaam is one example of such a case. Deuteronomy 23:6 tells us, "Nevertheless, the Lord your God would not hearken to Bilaam, but the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing."⁸³

The Rabbis even speculated the means by which God would actually change a person's words. "The Lord put a thing in the mouth of Bilaam."⁸⁴ Rabbi Eleazar says "the thing" was an angel. Rabbi Yochanan says it was a hook.⁸⁵

Bilaam had every intention of cursing Israel. His motivations were clear. Bilaam said, "Behold, the people that are coming out of Egypt...now, I shall come to curse them."⁸⁶ This comes to teach that Bilaam hated Israel even more than Balak did.⁸⁷ Similarly, it is taught that like Pharaoh, Bilaam saddled his own ass, because of his passion for his mission. A Tanna teaches on the authority of Rabbi Simeon ben Eleazar that hatred disregards the rule of dignified conduct. Surely, Bilaam had many servants of his own to do such a menial task.⁸⁸

⁸² Numbers Rabbah 2:12 based on Numbers 23:10.

⁸³ Tanchuma Yelamdenu, Toledot 12.

⁸⁴ Numbers 23:5.

⁸⁵ Sanhedrin 105b.

⁸⁶ Numbers 22:11.

⁸⁷ Numbers Rabbah 20:9.

⁸⁸ Sanhedrin 105b, Mechilta deRabi Ishmael, Beshalach 2, Genesis Rabbah 55:8.

However, Exodus Rabbah teaches that whenever people see Israel, they are compelled to praise them. Bilaam the wicked had intended to curse them, but he praised them, "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob?"⁸⁹ Similarly, Rabbi Pinchas teaches that whenever God makes a decree for what one should do, no one can deny Him nor revoke His decree. Bilaam and Jonah are examples of those who wanted to curse, but had to bless. How hard Bilaam sought to curse Israel, yet he was compelled against his own will to bless them.⁹⁰

Rabbi Yochanan teaches that we can assume that Bilaam intended just the opposite of every blessing he recited for Israel. When he said, "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob."⁹¹ he wanted to say that Israel should possess no synagogues or schoolhouses. When he said, "and your tabernacles, O Israel,"⁹² he meant to say that the Shechinah should not rest upon them. "As the valleys are they spread forth"⁹³ was intended to be a curse upon their kingdom, so that it would not endure. Similarly, Bilaam wished to curse Israel so that no olive trees nor vineyards would grow for them, no fragrant odors would waft over them, no tall kings would rule them, that no king of theirs would be the son of another king, nor would Israel rule over any other nation. This Talmudic passage continues by sadly admitting historical truths. Despite Deuteronomy 23:6 which tells that God turned every one of Bilaam's curses into blessings, all of his curses were eventually fulfilled, except the one about synagogues and schools.⁹⁴ The way this comment ends is very bold.

⁸⁹ Exodus Rabbah 20:5 based on Numbers 24:5.

⁹⁰ Exodus Rabbah 4:3.

⁹¹ Numbers 24:5.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Numbers 24:6.

⁹⁴ Sandefrin 105b.

The Rabbis say that although God succeeded in changing Bilaam's words, He did not succeed in changing their intended content or power.

Others come to God's defense, saying, "Bilaam's curses were like a cedar. It should not have been blown down by all the winds of the world even though its roots are few. However, immediately the south wind uprooted it and turned it upside down."⁹⁵

According to Pesikta deRav Kahana, Bilaam saw that Moses was going to bestow four blessings upon Israel and that he, Bilaam, was expected to bestow seven blessings upon Israel to correspond with the seven altars he built. So he reasoned, "If I bestow seven blessings and Moses bestows four, there will be eleven." The Holy One, blessed be He said, "I shall not allow the wicked Bilaam to finish his blessings. Instead, I shall settle for the three blessings Bilaam offers grudgingly upon Israel, in addition to Moses' wholehearted four blessings."⁹⁶ This early Amoraic comment suggests that God had a particular agenda and once it was completed, He had no more reason to alter Bilaam's words. Once God's goal was met, He allowed Bilaam to resume acting according to free will.

Bilaam Acts with Free Will

There are a few midrashim which, surprisingly, seem to preach against the Torah text in order to emphasize Bilaam's free will. It is no surprise that these few pro-free will interpretations come from the Tanaitic and early Amoraic periods.

⁹⁵ Sanhedrin 105b-106a.

⁹⁶ Pesikta deRab Kehana 1:4 and 1:11.

One implies that Bilaam independently chose not to curse Israel, because he knew the merit of the patriarchs. He compared Israel to "rocks"⁹⁷ and the Rabbis understand the "rocks" to be the patriarchs.⁹⁸ Because Israel kept track of the ancestry and family lineage, they had protection and greatness.⁹⁹

Others teach that Bilaam was not punished at all, because he did not reject God. He may have wanted to curse Israel, but he never would have dared to curse God. According to the Babylonian Talmud, a blasphemer is not punished unless he curses God's name by using God's name. Rabbi Samuel teaches that we know this is so because Bilaam said, "How can I curse whom God has not cursed?"¹⁰⁰

According to Sanhedrin 105b, God is usually angered every day by Israel, but during the time of Bilaam, He chose to withhold His anger so that Bilaam would be forced to ask, "How can I curse those whom God has not cursed?"¹⁰¹ Even when God was furious with Israel, He only cursed Israel's anger, not Israel itself.¹⁰²

These two similar midrashim come to teach that God carefully strategizes so that human beings can act freely, but in a way that helps to realize His plan. It would be much simpler for the Rabbis to take the surface-level understanding of the Torah text, which reports that God directly places

⁹⁷ Numbers 23:9.

⁹⁸ Esther Rabbah 7:10.

⁹⁹ Numbers Rabbah 2:5, Pesikta Rabbati 12:5.

¹⁰⁰ Sanhedrin 56a based on Numbers 23:8.

¹⁰¹ Numbers 23:8.

¹⁰² Tanchuma Yelamdenu, Yayechi 10.

new words into Bilaam's mouth. However, for the sake of maintaining the possibility of free will, they imagine elaborate alternatives.

According to Genesis Rabbah, Bilaam was one of four biblical characters upon whose flask the Holy One, blessed be He knocked, only to find it a chamber-pot.¹⁰³ God asked Bilaam, "What men are these with you?"¹⁰⁴ and commanded him not to get involved with Balak and his people. But early the next morning, Bilaam went to speak with Balak's dignitaries. He freely chose to reject God's command, but must pay the consequences in the end.

God punishes Bilaam for his Wicked Acts of Free Will:

"Bilaam took up his theme and said, 'Alas, who can survive except when God has willed it!'" (Numbers 24:23).

Some suggest Bilaam was punished physically for breaking from God's command. According to the Babylonian Talmud, Bilaam suffered all the ways by which Israel killed "them" – stoning, burning, decapitation, and strangulation. According to Rabbi Chaninah, Bilaam was either thirty-three or thirty-four years old when he died.¹⁰⁵ Scholars believe these comments are meant to allude to the death of Jesus.¹⁰⁶

Others teach that Bilaam was punished physically for underestimating the extent of God's control over the universe. God blinded Bilaam in one eye, because he reasoned that God was so pure and holy, of course He does not concern Himself with such minute details as determining whether the seed of an Israelite will develop into a righteous man or not.¹⁰⁷ Others argue he

¹⁰³ Genesis Rabbah 19:11.

¹⁰⁴ Numbers 22:9.

¹⁰⁵ Sanhedrin 106b.

¹⁰⁶ Neusner's note on Sanhedrin 106b.

was punished for his impure practices. For example, Bilaam limped on one foot and was blind in one eye because he practiced enchantment. Others say he performed bestiality with his donkey.¹⁰⁸

Still others believe he was not punished physically, but politically. Originally Bilaam held the status of a prophet. However, after he tried to curse Israel, he was demoted to the level of a soothsayer.¹⁰⁹ Similarly, Rabbi Eliezer HaKappar teaches, "Whoever honors his fellow for the sake of personal gain will in the end depart from him in shame." This is found to be so with the wicked Bilaam who honored Balak for the sake of his own advancement, but in the end he departed from him in shame.¹¹⁰

It may be only a coincidence, but all of these midrashim, which emphasize a system of reward and punishment, originate in the Tanaite and early Amoraic periods. Divine retribution requires human free will. Without it, reward and punishment are absurd. These midrashim are not repeated in the later collections as others often are. This may indicate a critical shift in theology.

The Clash of the Wills: Bilaam tries to come between God and Israel

The following section suggests that Bilaam's sin was not acting freely, but using his position to try to break the covenant of love between Israel and God. Unlike Pharaoh, who wanted Israel to worship him as a god, Bilaam's motivations were purely political.

¹⁰⁷ Niddah 31a.

¹⁰⁸ Sanhedrin 105a.

¹⁰⁹ Sanhedrin 106a.

¹¹⁰ Avot deRabi Natan 28b (1&2).

Bilaam proved that Israel is superior to other nations, because he was not an Israelite and yet he declared, "And he (Israel) shall not be reckoned among the nations."¹¹¹ Bilaam knew the uniqueness of Israel as a people and the uniqueness of Israel's relationship with their God as well. When Bilaam prophesied, "Who can count the dust of Jacob?"¹¹² he referred to the dust with which Joshua used to cover up the hill of the foreskins of Israel. God had commanded Joshua to circumcise the Israelites a second time¹¹³ and they did so.¹¹⁴ Bilaam observed the great faith Israel maintained in their God, and yet he tried to come between them.

Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish says, "Woe to him who makes himself alive by the name of God!" Rabbi Yochanan says, "Woe to the nation that tries to hinder God's redeeming of his children! Woe to him who would throw his garment between a copulating lion and lioness."¹¹⁵ This metaphor comes to show how tightly God and Israel are bound together. Nothing can come between them. And yet, Bilaam attempted to do just that. He told Balak how to lure Israel away from God by introducing them to fine linen, young women, wine, and licentiousness. They would do anything to trick Israel into denying Torah and worshipping idols.¹¹⁶

Rabbi Abba bar Kahana teaches that Bilaam was even more ruthless than the philosophers of his own day. He explains that when the philosophers are asked, "Can we overcome this people (of Israel)?", they

¹¹¹ Sanhedrin 39a-b on Numbers 23:9.

¹¹² Numbers 23:10.

¹¹³ Joshua 5:2.

¹¹⁴ Pirqe deRabbi Eliezer on "The Trials of Abraham."

¹¹⁵ Sanhedrin 106a.

¹¹⁶ Avot deRabbi Natan 17a (1), Sanhedrin 106a.

reply, "Go around to their synagogues. If there is a hum of children's voices (studying Torah), you cannot prevail over them. Otherwise you can."¹¹⁷

Bilaam, however, did not consider the strength of Israel's devotion. He believed his determination could overcome Israel's devotion to God and even God's determination to protect Israel.

Of course, all his efforts were for naught, because the love between God and Israel cannot be shaken. According to Exodus Rabbah, Bilaam's plan was turned against him. Bilaam came to curse Israel, but ended up blessing them and even cursing Amalek! He also blessed Jethro, who had allied himself with Moses.¹¹⁸

A parable is composed to describe Bilaam's situation. One bird was chasing after another bird. The first bird was perched on a statue of the king. The second bird feared that if he used a stone to kill the first bird, he might hit the statue by accident and then be killed by the king himself, because of the damage. He then reasoned, if he used a pole to reach the statue it might not be long enough. So all he could say to the first bird, was, "You have made a fine escape." Jethro made a good escape by joining Israel after years of advising the Pharaoh in Egypt. He escaped the punishment he deserved. Bilaam observed Jethro's repentance and Amalek's maintenance of his evil ways. Therefore, he blessed Jethro and cursed Amalek.¹¹⁹

The Rabbis use Bilaam as a paradigm for the political rulers of their own day. Just as Bilaam knew of Israel's unique devotion to God, so did Rome and Greece. Just as Bilaam tried to lure Israel's allegiance from God to Balak's kingdom, so did the empires of Rome and Greece. The Rabbis look

¹¹⁷ Lamentations Proems 2.

¹¹⁸ Exodus Rabbah 27:3.

¹¹⁹ Exodus Rabbah 27:6.

forward to a time when they will be free from foreign rule, a time when their relationship with God will be neither threatened nor interrupted.

Bilaam and The World to Come

Despite his intentions, Bilaam's prophecy worked to Israel's advantage in this world and will continue to benefit Israel in the world to come. The Holy One blessed be He said to Bilaam, "Like the time" and not "in the time" -- not in the time in which you live, but like the time when I am about to bring deliverance to Israel.¹²⁰

In this world, Israel is like dust. In the world to come, however, Israel will be like the sands of the sea. Israel will then fulfill Bilaam's prophesy of Numbers 24:19 and will destroy the other nations of the world.¹²¹ Similarly, it is taught that when Israel asks God, "Master of the Universe, how long shall we remain subjected to Esau?," He replies, "Until the day about which Bilaam said, 'There shall step forth a star out of Jacob and a scepter shall rise out of Israel'¹²² arrives. At that time I will cause my kingdom to shine forth and I will reign over them."¹²³

Exodus Rabbah offers the following parable. Someone wanted to know when the gladiator fight will start. He asked the gladiator, who answered, "It is far off." He asked the manager of the gladiator stadium and he answered, "It is soon." Why? Because the gladiator knew he would be slain as soon as the show begins. When Israel asked Bilaam, "When will salvation come?" He answered, "Not yet." However, God explained to Israel, "Don't you know

¹²⁰ Avot deRabi Natan 261 (2).

¹²¹ Numbers Rabbah 2:13.

¹²² Numbers 24:17.

¹²³ Deuteronomy Rabbah 1:20.

that he wants to put off the time of ultimate redemption, because he knows that once salvation comes, he will go to Gehinom? Wait for salvation. It is close at hand."¹²⁴

The midrashim which are recorded here again show that the theme of divine providence is presented throughout the literature. However, the theme of free will is represented much more clearly in the interpretations of the Tana'im and early Amora'im. The earlier Rabbis are interested in the individual's relationship with God, how one follows or rejects God's command, and how God responds. The Amora'im of the middle period tend to hold God at a distance. They are still very committed to the covenant between God and Israel as a whole. However, it seems they have shifted away from the idea that God is interested in individual relationships, not to mention His relationship with a heathen like Bilaam. Therefore, they find the theory of divine providence more compelling. It is a less intimate, more distanced way that God can interact with the individual.

The Covenant between the Pieces

The covenant between the pieces is a classic biblical model for how God's promises are fulfilled. It is complicated by the fact that the promise is primarily a promise of oppression for Israel. It is further complicated by an inconsistent prediction of how long the oppression will last. Therefore, interpretation is needed to understand such difficulties.

According to Mechilta deRabi Ishmael God promised Israel a detailed account of the development of His relationship with them, including the

¹²⁴ Exodus Rabbah 30:24.

promise He made to Abram.¹²⁵ Even Abram, who endured ten trials, was not unjustly favored by God. God was just and decreed against Abram through the covenant between the pieces.¹²⁶ He said, "Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years."¹²⁷

Divine Providence determines Israel's Fate with Egypt

Many of the Rabbis are sure that God fulfills His promises. They consider God's speech to be as real as action. God said to Abram, "To your seed, **have I given** this land." He does not say, "I will give."¹²⁸ The implication is that the land was given to Israel long before they ever arrived there. This is the language of divine providence.

It is taught that Avshalom was punished for his sin with Batsheva through "the deep plan" of the King of the Universe. Rabbi Chanina bar Papa explains that similarly it is through "the deep plan" that the righteous Abraham was buried in Hebron, so that God's promise (i.e. "Know with surety that your seed shall be a stranger in the land that is not theirs"¹²⁹) would be fulfilled.¹³⁰ Similarly, Abraham had to buy the burial site for Sarah as a stranger, not as an owner. Why? In order to fulfill the covenant that God made with him – a promise that He would give the land to Abram's descendants, not to Abram himself.¹³¹

¹²⁵ Mechilta deRabi Ishmael, Pesacha 12.

¹²⁶ Exodus Rabbah 30:16.

¹²⁷ Genesis 15:13.

¹²⁸ Genesis Rabbah 44:22.

¹²⁹ Genesis 15:13.

¹³⁰ Sotah 10b-11a.

¹³¹ Genesis Rabbah 58:6.

God fulfilled the positive decrees He declared to Abram. The Holy One Blessed be He promised as many descendants as the stars in the sky. But in fact, the multitudes of Israel are many more than the stars of the universe.¹³² When Israel went out from Egypt, God left with His head held high, like one who had finally paid off a debt in full. His debt was the promise He made to Abram between the pieces.¹³³

And God fulfilled the negative decrees He declared to Abram as well. According to Rabbi Eleazar, even Esau knew that God always fulfills His decrees. Esau heard that Abram's descendants were doomed to slavery, because of the covenant made between the pieces. In order to avoid such a fate, Esau fled from Jacob.¹³⁴

Many midrashim point to the story of Joseph as evidence of God's will to realize His decree at the covenant between the pieces. "Israel was destined to descend into servitude in Egypt, but Joseph was predestined to help them."¹³⁵ Similarly, The Holy One blessed be He concealed from Joseph's family the fact that Joseph was still alive in Egypt. God had to further develop the plot, so that all the tribes of Israel would come down to Egypt and eventually become slaves to Pharaoh.¹³⁶ Just as God used Joseph, the smallest of the tribes, as an emissary to fulfill the covenant between the pieces, so does God use flies as His emissaries for His will.¹³⁷

¹³² Deuteronomy Rabbah 1:11.

¹³³ Pesikta Rabbati 49:6.

¹³⁴ Genesis Rabbah 82:14.

¹³⁵ Tanchuma Yelamdenu, Shemot 17.

¹³⁶ Tanchuma Yelamdenu, Miketz 4, Tanchuma Buber 9:15.

¹³⁷ Tanchuma Yelamdenu, Vayeshev 3.

Rabbi Judah ben Shalum teaches that although God warned that Israel would suffer in chains on their way to slavery in Egypt, He found a way to preserve their dignity. God caused Jacob to love Joseph so much that his brothers would hate him and sell him to the Ishmaelites and bring him down to Egypt. Jacob and his other sons then descended to Egypt to reunite with Joseph.¹³⁸ Jacob knew about the decree God made to Abram, and so he was afraid to go to Egypt to meet Joseph. But still he was compelled against his will to go.¹³⁹ He was one of many pawns in God's plan.

In Genesis 15:14, God told Abram, "I will execute judgment on the nation they shall serve, and in the end they shall go free with great wealth." According to Tractate Berachot, God commanded Moses to tell Israel to take gold and silver from the Egyptians, so that Abram could not accuse God of not fulfilling His promise. However, Israel did not care about the riches. They only wanted to save their own lives. Israel is likened to a prisoner who was told, "Tomorrow we will release you with wealth." The prisoner replied, "Let me go alive today and I will take nothing from you." Rabbi Ammi argues that the Egyptians gave their riches to Israel against their will. Others say that Israel took the riches against their will, because they were afraid to be weighed down in the desert.¹⁴⁰

In contrast, Mechilta deRabi Ishmael claims that Israel did leave Egypt with wealth, just as God had promised.¹⁴¹ God was sure to keep this promise so that Moses could use it as an example and say to Israel, "From the fact that He kept the oath...you know He is God, the faithful One."¹⁴²

¹³⁸ Tanchuma Yelamdenu, Vayeshev 3, Tanchuma Buber 9:15, Numbers Rabbah 9:24.

¹³⁹ Tanchuma Buber 9:17.

¹⁴⁰ Berachot 9a-b.

¹⁴¹ Mechilta deRabi Ishmael, Pesacha 14.

If the Rabbis are going to glean any insight into God's ways from the story of the covenant between the pieces, they must make sense out of the seeming inconsistencies in the text. In the actual covenant, God declared that Israel would serve in Egypt for four hundred years and also that they would return to the land in the fourth generation. However, in Exodus 12:40 it is said that Israel suffered for four hundred and thirty years, and still elsewhere it is said that only two hundred and ten years would pass before they would be freed from Egypt. The following midrashim are the Rabbis' attempts to understand the seeming discrepancies.

The Babylonian Talmud teaches that God manipulated the smallest of details to ensure the timing of the exodus from Egypt. The Holy One, blessed be He even fixed the moment that Moses was conceived so that the timing of the exodus would match His plan.¹⁴³

Some say God was bound to keep His promise, even though it meant waiting the full four hundred years.¹⁴⁴ God waited four hundred years to the day. The fifteenth of Nisan was the very day designated for Israel's redemption from Egypt. It was the very date on which the covenant was established with Abram. It was also the day on which the three angels came to visit Abraham and the day on which Isaac was born.¹⁴⁵

Others disagree and explain that when God makes a promise for Israel's benefit, He never delays in fulfilling it, even if Israel does not deserve it, even if they are not worthy. The example given is that God decreed, "four hundred years," but Israel was actually redeemed after only two hundred and

¹⁴² Deuteronomy Rabbah 3:3, Numbers Rabbah 19:15.

¹⁴³ Sotah 11b-12b.

¹⁴⁴ Exodus Rabbah 3:3.

¹⁴⁵ Mechilta deRabi Ishmael, Pesacha 14, Tanchuma Yelamdenu, Bo 9, Pesikta Rabbati 42:3.

ten years. God never lies about that which is detrimental for Israel, but concerning that which is beneficial for Israel, one can never be sure. The provided proof-text is Bilaam's prophecy in Numbers 23:19.¹⁴⁶

Genesis Rabbah attempts to explain the difficult verse from Bilaam's prophecy. He said, "God is not a man that He should lie...When He has said He will not do it and which He has spoken He will not make it good."¹⁴⁷ It is taught that when God decrees to bring goodness to the world, then the A part of the verse is true. However, when He decrees to bring suffering to the world, the B part of the verse is true.¹⁴⁸ Examples come from the account of the covenant between the pieces. When God said to Abram, "I will judge that nation whom they shall serve,"¹⁴⁹ He was not lying, because it was for the benefit of the world. When God said to Abram, "I will oppress them for four hundred years,"¹⁵⁰ He would not bring it to fruition, because it would only bring suffering to the world.¹⁵¹

According to Mechilta deRabi Ishmael, God did not predict a very good time for Israel to come out of Egypt. When the four hundred years had passed, the Canaanites had just recently taken the land. When they heard that Israel was coming, they burned the seeds, cut down the trees, destroyed the buildings, and stopped up the wells. God said, "But I promised Abram I would not bring them into a desolate land, but into a land full of all good things." Therefore, God compensated for His poor timing, by leading Israel

¹⁴⁶ Numbers Rabbah 23:8.

¹⁴⁷ Numbers 23:18.

¹⁴⁸ Genesis Rabbah 53:4, Tanchuma Buber 4:36, Numbers Rabbah 23:8.

¹⁴⁹ Genesis 15:14.

¹⁵⁰ Genesis 15:13.

¹⁵¹ Genesis Rabbah 53:4.

through the desert for forty years, so that the Canaanites would have time to rise and repair what they had spoiled.¹⁵²

Similarly, "God did not lead them by the way of the Land of the Philistines,"¹⁵³ because the tribe of Ephraim, in error, departed from Egypt before the destined time. As a result, three hundred thousand of them were slain.¹⁵⁴ They were slain because they counted the four hundred years from the day of the covenant between the pieces, but they miscalculated by thirty years. They should have started from the birth of Isaac, thirty years later. God reasoned, if Israel were to see the bones of their Ephraimite brothers strewn across the desert road, they would have turned back to Egypt out of fear. Therefore, God led them by another way.¹⁵⁵ These interpretations proudly show that God is willing to sway from His promise for the sake of Israel. He is not afraid to risk seeming powerless to those who cannot understand the complexity of His ways. One could also understand these midrashim to question God's omniscience. If He had anticipated the actions of the Canaanites or the Ephraimites, He could have predicted a proper time for the exodus from the start.

In contrast, Mechilta deRabi Ishmael claims that God fulfilled the exact promise He made with Abram.¹⁵⁶ It solves the discrepancy between "four hundred years," "four hundred and thirty years," and "four generations." "Four hundred and thirty years" was decreed at the covenant between the pieces. But Abram had no children at that time. God commanded, "Know

¹⁵² Mechilta deRabi Ishmael, Beshalach 1, Tanchuma Yelamdenu, Beshalach 1.

¹⁵³ Exodus 8:17.

¹⁵⁴ Sanhedrin 92b.

¹⁵⁵ Exodus Rabbah 20:11.

¹⁵⁶ Mechilta deRabi Ishmael, Pesacha 17 and 18.

well that your offspring shall be strangers."¹⁵⁷ "Four hundred years" was decreed immediately after Isaac was born, thirty years later.¹⁵⁸ Furthermore, if Israel repented, redemption would come sooner, in the fourth generation. If they did not repent, slavery would last the full four hundred years.¹⁵⁹ Such an interpretation highlights the possibility that God's will can be influenced by human choices and the human will.

The Rabbis imagine that God said to Abram, "Know that I shall disperse your seed. Know that I will gather them together. Know that I will give them in pledge. Know that I will redeem them. Know that I will allow them to be enslaved. Know that I will free them." Four hundred years does not refer to "serve them and they shall afflict them." It refers to "Your seed shall be a stranger." Israel was in Egypt for longer than four hundred years, but they were strangers for four hundred years, starting with the birth of Isaac.¹⁶⁰

Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah teaches that Israel was only in Egypt for two hundred and ten years.¹⁶¹ Israel was predestined to serve in Egypt for two hundred and ten years. Therefore, God chose the name "Isaac," because its numerical value is two hundred and eight. However, two years were added to the value of Isaac's name, when Joseph lost faith that God would save him from prison, and so, he turned to the baker for help. It took the baker two years to do what he could, but in the end, of course, it was God who saves Joseph.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁷ Genesis 15:13.

¹⁵⁸ A paralleled explanation is found in Tanchuma Yelamdenu, Shemot 4.

¹⁵⁹ Mechilta deRabi Ishmael, Pesacha 14, Tanchuma Yelamdenu, Bo 9.

¹⁶⁰ Genesis Rabbah 44:18.

¹⁶¹ Pirke deRabi Eliezer 48.

Rabbi Judah teaches that when Moses told Israel, "You will be redeemed this month," they asked, "How can this be so? It has only been two hundred and ten years of the four hundred years of promised oppression." Moses explained that God desired Israel's redemption and so He had decided to shorten their suffering. Rabbi Nechemia teaches that for the sake of Israel's redemption, God would overlook the idolatrous ways of Egypt and even the wicked deeds of Israel. Rabbi Yudan teaches that the promise of four hundred years was indeed fulfilled, because Israel suffered slavery for two hundred and ten years and an additional one hundred and ninety years of alien status in Egypt.¹⁶³

Avot deRabi Natan 23b(1-2) advises that one should say little and do much. God was an exemplar of such behavior when He spoke at the covenant between the pieces. He used only a two-letter word – *dalet, nun* – "judgment." Rabbi Eleazar teaches in the name of Rabbi Yosi that with these same two letters would God redeem Israel from Egypt. But if they repent, God would redeem them with seventy-two letters, the number of letters which make up the longest name for God. Rabbi Abin claims that He did indeed redeem Israel from Egypt by His name, consisting of seventy-two letters.¹⁶⁴

The Rabbis imagine that because God's decree was used to know the future in biblical times, perhaps it can be used to predict the future in their own day. Genesis 15:14 does not say, "And that nation." It says, "And also that nation whom they shall serve." This indicates that Abram's descendants would be subjugated by Egypt and the four kingdoms of Babylon, Persia, Media, and Rome as well.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶² Tanchuma Yelamdenu, Shemot 4.

¹⁶³ Pesikta deRav Kahana 5:7, Pesikta Rabbati 15:7.

¹⁶⁴ Genesis Rabbah 44:19, Deuteronomy Rabbah 1:11, Tanchuma Yelamdenu, Veyera 4.

Similarly, Rabbi Dosa uses the prediction of Israel's slavery in Egypt to predict the days of the Messiah. He assumes that the days of the Messiah will be four hundred years, because Israel was enslaved in Egypt for four hundred years, according to Genesis 15:13.¹⁶⁶

Throughout the ages, the Rabbis support the idea that God determines the fate of Israel. There is a God who declares and fulfills predictions of the future. The midrashim produced by the Tana'im and early Amoraim describe that God has a "deep plan" for the world, but He is not unwilling to stray from it. God is flexible and often reacts to human choices, even if it means altering His plan. In contrast, the Rabbis of the middle Amoraic period more often describe a God who manipulates individuals and entire peoples in order to secure His will. The later interpreters repeat the midrashim of their predecessors who depict a flexible God. However, the midrashim which they create themselves describe a more rigid God, who has little patience for those who compromise His plan.

Free Will Shapes Israel's Experience with Egypt

The most prominent defender of free will among the Rabbis, Akiva, teaches that good things happen because of good men. However, ultimately Israel would have come out of Egypt even if there were no Moses or Aaron. Likewise, Israel was destined for slavery even if there were no Pharaoh. Israel was destined to worship idols, even if there were no Jereboam. Israel was destined to be destroyed even if there were no Nebuchadnezzar. If Israel deserves death as punishment, God will use a king, a demon, a leopard, a bear, a snake or scorpion to do so.¹⁶⁷ The Holy One, blessed be He has a "deep

¹⁶⁵ Genesis Rabbah 44:19.

¹⁶⁶ Sanhedrin 99a, Pesikta Rabbati 1:7.

plan" for Israel. He must see it realized, but He is open to the infinite number of paths that will lead to its fulfillment.

Rabbi Judah ben Rabbi Simon compares God to a king who had three friends, without whose consent he did nothing. But on one particular occasion he desired to do something without their consent, whereupon he evicted one from the palace. He put the second friend in prison and sealed the door. But the third friend, he loved exceedingly, and so he said, "I still cannot do anything without his consent." Adam is likened to the first friend. God drove him out of His garden.¹⁶⁸ Noah is likened to the second friend. He was shut in.¹⁶⁹ But because God loved Abram so much, He said, "I will do nothing without his consent."¹⁷⁰ Abram did not object to God's plan for Israel. He agreed to add his will to God's will. However, if Abram did not consent, as in the case of God's plan for Sodom and Gemorah, The Holy One, blessed be He would have taken his opinion into consideration.

Similarly, it is taught that in the world to come, the Holy One blessed be He will say to Israel, "Go to your forefathers, and they will convince you of your wrong-doing." Israel will then say, "But Abraham did not entreat mercy for us in the former world." God will address Abraham in the world to come and say, "Your children have sinned against Me." And Abraham will answer, "Sovereign of the Universe! Let them be wiped out for the sanctification of Your Name."¹⁷¹

The Rabbis debate what exactly was revealed to Abram at the covenant between the pieces. Rabbi Yudan says that only the fate of Israel in this world

¹⁶⁷ Sotah 46b.

¹⁶⁸ Genesis 3:24.

¹⁶⁹ Genesis 7:16.

¹⁷⁰ Rabbi Samuel ben Nachman offers a similar parable in Genesis Rabbah 49:2.

¹⁷¹ Shabbat 89a-b.

were revealed to Abram. Their fate in the next world was not made known to him. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai disagrees and teaches that both the fate of Israel in this world and in the world to come are revealed to him. Rabbi Leazar believes that God revealed to Abram the future up until the day when the Messiah will arrive. Rabbi Yosi says God revealed the future of Israel from that day forward.¹⁷² Although God promises Israel the land of ten peoples, He only gave them the land of seven peoples. God will fulfill His promise in the days of the Messiah by giving Israel the land of the other three peoples.¹⁷³

These early midrashim support the belief that God is interested in the will of human beings. He takes the will of human beings into consideration when determining His own will. Based on this assumption, the Rabbis of the Tanaitic and early Amoraic periods discuss the possibilities of their role in bringing the world to come more often than their later counterparts. The early Rabbis believe their choices effect God's will for that future. They seem to reject the notion that God has set a fixed time for the coming of the Messiah, that they are completely detached from that decision.

God Punishes Israel's Sinful Will

Abram said to God, "I looked at the constellation which rules my destiny and saw that I am fated to go childless." God said to him, "*Lech l'cha* from the constellations. Israel is not subject to planetary influences." The Talmud warns here that studying the stars this way is a form of witchcraft. If one stays away from astrology, he will be closer to God than the angels. Abram was punished with the decree that his descendants will be enslaved in

¹⁷² Genesis Rabbah 44:22.

¹⁷³ Genesis Rabbah 44:23.

Egypt for two hundred and ten years. According to Rabbi Abbahu who spoke in Rabbi Eleazar's name, he deserved such punishment because he used scholars as servants. Rabbi Samuel ben Nachmani argues it was because he went too far in testing the promises of God, with the words, "How can I know?"¹⁷⁴

God reciprocates the attitudes of individual human beings. When Abram lacked directness, God responded similarly with the ambiguous promise of an heir. When Abram was clear and direct with his asking, "How can I know?"¹⁷⁵ God was, too, with His decree, "Your seed will be a stranger."¹⁷⁶ When Job spoke to God with disrespect, God reminded him of how Abram, one of his most favored people, was punished for disrespectfully asking, "How can I know?"¹⁷⁷

Rabbi Joshua warns, "When you are on a journey alone, busy your mind with Torah and you will be protected." According to Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, it was because Abram walked with Pharaoh for four paces that Pharaoh was allowed to enslave Abram's descendants for four hundred years.¹⁷⁸ Straying from Torah for four paces is considered as worthy of punishment as is challenging God's ability to fulfill His promises. They are both a kind of betrayal.

It is taught that God brought Israel out of Egypt only for the sake of the virtuous women among them. He foresaw that they would perform His will

¹⁷⁴ Nedarim 32a, Pirke deRabi Eliezer 48 agrees with Rabbi Samuel ben Nachman, parallel is found in Numbers Rabbah 2:12.

¹⁷⁵ Exodus 5:8.

¹⁷⁶ Leviticus Rabbah 11:5 based on Exodus 5:13.

¹⁷⁷ Pesikta Rabbati 47:3.

¹⁷⁸ Sotah 46b.

and build a Tabernacle for Him. Therefore, he rewarded them with redemption.¹⁷⁹

This set of midrashim which focuses on the system of reward and punishment rely on a system of free will. If God determined every word or deed, there would be no need for reward or punishment. The majority of these midrashim have their origins in the Tanaitic and early Amoraic periods.

Interplay between the Will of God and Will of Human Beings

Psalms 40:5 is interpreted to mean that Abraham was intended to accept the yoke of the kingdoms and Israel was intended to endure in the world. God showed Abraham four things: Torah, sacrifices, Gehenna, and the yoke of the kingdoms. God said, "If your children keep the Torah and the sacrifices, they will not have to suffer Gehenna nor the yoke of the kingdoms. However, because it is predestined that the Temple be destroyed and the sacrifices cease, which do you choose for your descendants, Gehenna or the yoke of the kingdoms?" Some say that Abraham chose the kingdoms by his own will and God agreed with his choice. Others argue that Abraham was so torn, that God told him to choose the suffering of the kingdoms.¹⁸⁰ This midrash is a wonderful example of the debate between believers of free will and believers of providence. Depending on which conclusion one upholds, one can believe in Abraham's freedom or God's determinism. Perhaps this midrash is often repeated, because the third belief it offers is appealing. It suggests that there is a constant interplay between the human and divine

¹⁷⁹ Numbers Rabbah 3:6.

¹⁸⁰ Song of Songs Rabbah 2:8:1, Pesikta deRav Kahana 5:2, Pesikta Rabbati 15:2.

wills. Sometimes the interplay is a harmonious meshing of the two. Other times it is a violent clash.

Another suggested example of the interplay between the wills is that Moses scolded God, saying, "You promised Abram in Genesis 15:14 that You would redeem his descendants. Why are you sending me to Egypt? I am only human." God agreed with Moses, but insisted, "You go down to Egypt first and introduce Me to Israel, then I will follow to save them."¹⁸¹

The vast majority of the interpretations of the covenant between the pieces and its fulfillment support the notion of divine providence over human history. Throughout the ages the Rabbis believe that The Holy One has a plan for the universe. In this case, God's plan was for Israel to be enslaved in Egypt, redeemed, and then restored to their land. The earlier Rabbis assert that God would surely reach His goal. However, they suggest that although the end was predetermined, the means by which it was ultimately realized was not determined. They leave open a window of opportunity for human free will. God allows free will and cares about the choices individuals make. The later Rabbis also believe that God wills a plan. However, they do not imagine God as flexible, patient, or interested in the human will. In fact, they often construct midrashim which depict God as a manipulator of human wills in order to advance His plan.

Haman the Agagite

Unlike the rest of the Hebrew bible, the book of Esther does not make known God's role in its narrative. It seems that the entire story line is maintained by the free will of the individual characters. It seems God is not

¹⁸¹ Exodus Rabbah 15:14 and 18.

involved even indirectly. But this is an impossibility in the minds of the Rabbis. They may debate the extent of God's involvement and the means by which He participates, but they all agree that God is constantly present in the unfolding of human history, and the destiny of the Jewish people in particular. The Rabbis take many liberties to insert God into the story as they see fit. But this is not an easy task. The difficulty is reflected in the following midrash.

One voice comes through Lamentations Rabbah to teach that God sent Haman to Israel as punishment for their sins.¹⁸² God grieved for His children and brought to them an adversary and an enemy who exposed their degradation. His name was Haman. A second voice argues that Haman arose by his own will. "Who is he that says and it comes to pass when God doesn't command it?"¹⁸³ The answer is Haman. Haman made commands, not God. God chose to maintain the role He had distinguished for Himself in human history. He did not fix Haman's actions. He only responded to them, by commanding that Haman's wickedness return upon his head.¹⁸⁴ In this difficult and terse midrash, the two opposing voices of the problem of free will and divine providence are set side by side. The following study will attempt to better understand the nuances of both beliefs.

Divine Providence in Shushan

"Israel was destined to be sold in the days of Haman, but Mordechai was predestined to save them."¹⁸⁵ Rabbi Berechiah teaches in the name of

¹⁸² Lamentations Rabbah 3:33, parallel found in Pesikta Rabbati.

¹⁸³ Lamentations 3:37.

¹⁸⁴ Lamentations Rabbah 3:34:9.

¹⁸⁵ Tahnuma Yelamdenu, Shemot 17.

Rabbi Levi that God selected Esther and raised her up to do exactly what she did.¹⁸⁶ However, nowhere in Megillat Esther is God mentioned. Unlike the biblical accounts of Pharaoh, Bilaam, and the covenant between the pieces, nowhere is it written that God willed the story to unfold as it did. Therefore, in an effort to maintain the belief that God determines the political destiny of Israel, the Rabbis draw many verses from other biblical books as prooftexts for providence in Persia.

Rabbi Isaac the Smith teaches that "Your quiver" in Genesis 27:1 alludes to the kingdom of Media.¹⁸⁷ Rabbi Chanina bar Papa teaches that God brought Israel into abundance, fulfilling Psalms 66:12, in the days of Haman. The promises of Psalms 98:3 were fulfilled as well. All the ends of the earth saw the salvation of our Lord in the days of Mordechai and Esther, since letters of declaration were sent to all the provinces of the Persian Empire. Resh Lakish and Rabbi Joseph agree that Proverbs 28:15 refers to Achashuarus, the Persians, and Haman. Rabbi Nachman ben Yitzchak understands Psalms 124:1&2 to refer to Haman as well. "If it had not been for the Lord who was for us, let Israel now say, if it had not been the Lord who was for us when a man rose up against us" – "a man" and not a king. Raba teaches, "When the righteous are increased the people rejoice, but when the wicked bear rule the people sigh"¹⁸⁸ refers to Mordechai and Esther, and Haman respectively.¹⁸⁹

Isaiah 31:2 states, "Yet He is also wise, and brings evil." This serves to teach that even the evil which God brings upon the world He brings with

¹⁸⁶ Esther Rabbah 6:7.

¹⁸⁷ Tanchuma Buber, Toledot 6:10.

¹⁸⁸ Proverbs 29:2.

¹⁸⁹ Megillah 11a.

wisdom. "He does not call back His words, because He will rise against the house of the evil-doers."¹⁹⁰ This comes to teach that God will not take back His decrees of destruction. "Remembered and cursed" refers to Amalek and Haman. "Remembered and blessed" refers to Mordechai.¹⁹¹

The following midrashim cite verses in order to prove the predestination of Haman's plot and its ruin. Ecclesiastes 10:8 warns, "He who digs a pit shall fall into it." The Rabbis suggest that this refers to Haman, as it is written, "Let his wicked plot, which he devised against the Jews, recoil upon his own head."¹⁹² "The Lord is known by the judgment which He executes. The wicked is snared in the work of his own hands."¹⁹³ This refers to Haman who was hanged in the gallows set for Mordechai.¹⁹⁴

Similarly, the Rabbis imagine that when Haman decided to cast lots, leaving the future of the Jewish people up to The Fates, God said to Him, "Villain, son of a villain, your lot is drawn to be hanged." He cast the lot and it fell on himself. The celestial guardian said to God, "This wretch seeks to destroy the covenant between You and Your people and Your Torah." Haman's lot fell on the second day of the month, then the third day, then the fourth, etc. With every date, the celestial guardian explained to God why the date was false. Haman went through every Zodiac as well and still the guardian explained why no date was good for the destruction of Israel. Ultimately, God said to Haman, "Wretch! Fishes sometimes swallow and sometimes are swallowed, and now it is you who will be swallowed...Israel

¹⁹⁰ Isaiah 31:2.

¹⁹¹ Leviticus Rabbah 32:6.

¹⁹² Esther 9:25, similar theme found in Exodus Rabbah 20:10.

¹⁹³ Psalms 9:17.

¹⁹⁴ Midrash Tehillim 1:14 based on Psalm 9.

will not be blotted out,"¹⁹⁵ but "I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek."¹⁹⁶

The above midrashim, which cite biblical prooftexts for the sake of drawing God's determinism into the story of Esther, equally represent the early and late periods of Rabbinic literature. However, the following midrashim from Pirke deRabi Eliezer stand alone as tributes to God's practice of intruding on the efforts of the human will, for the sake of bringing about His own will.

Some Rabbis imagine that God sends His servants to intervene as the stories unfold, in order to advance its direction to merge with God's plan. For example, Elijah took the guise of Harbonah and told the king, "There is a tree in Haman's house taken from the Holy of Holies. It is fifty cubits high." The king ruled that Haman should be hanged from it. This decree fulfilled the word of Ezra 6:11.¹⁹⁷ Similarly, it is taught that God sent the angel Michael to physically lift Haman off of Esther.¹⁹⁸

Free Will in Shushan

Rabbi Akiva teaches that good things happen because of good men, but that ultimately Israel would have come out from under the rule of the wicked Haman even if there were no Mordechai or Esther.¹⁹⁹ This is a roundabout way of teaching that Mordechai and Esther were agents of God's will because they chose to be, not because God determined that they had to be.

¹⁹⁵ reference to II Kings 14:27.

¹⁹⁶ Esther Rabbah 7:11 refers to Exodus 17:14.

¹⁹⁷ Pirke deRabi Eliezer 49.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Semachot 47b (2).

If they had not elected themselves to do their work, someone else would have eventually taken the task instead. But Mordechai and Esther, as independents, chose to take on their shared responsibilities. The Rabbis teach that the Ecclesiastical proverb, "Two are better than one, for if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow"²⁰⁰ refers to Mordechai and Esther.²⁰¹ They each acted independently, but as a team.

One midrashic example of their effective teamwork is when Esther's strength failed after hearing Haman's decree about the fourteenth day of Adar. Esther told Mordechai to declare a fast day, and he did, even though it meant breaking the laws of Shabbat.²⁰² This is a clear example of how the Rabbis observed a hierarchy of wills. God has many expectations for His people, and it is up to the individual to determine when choosing one command over another is necessary. This is another way that free will is a critical addition and partner to the divine will.

The earlier Rabbis understand "And Esther obtained favor in the sight of all of them that looked upon her"²⁰³ to mean, in the sight of heavenly beings and in the sight of earthly beings.²⁰⁴ Esther earned such praise because of the person she chose to be, because of the character she developed over her lifetime. It is interesting to compare the later midrashic equivalent. The later Amoraim do not consider that Esther made herself worthy of praise, rather "God invested Esther with grace and love in the eyes of all who saw her."²⁰⁵

²⁰⁰ Ecclesiastes 4:9-10.

²⁰¹ Ecclesiastes Rabbah 4:9:1.

²⁰² Pirke deRabi Eliezer 49.

²⁰³ Esther 2:15.

²⁰⁴ Esther Rabbah 6:9, similar theme found in Esther Rabbah 4:3, Exodus Rabbah 2:4, and Tanchuma Yelamdenu, Shemot 13.

²⁰⁵ Pirke deRabi Eliezer 49.

The midrashim above favor free will and are primarily produced by the Tanaim and early Amoraim.

Is Haman Punished for His Wicked Acts or for those of His Ancestors?

The following early midrashim explain that Haman was punished for the wicked acts he chose by free will. Genesis Rabbah underscores Haman's wicked intentions. "Haman's eyes were enflamed with hate like those of a serpent." Furthermore, it is taught that Haman had the power to influence his people. "Media was itself not so very wicked, but Haman stirred up its evil passions."²⁰⁶

It is explained that because Haman became overly ambitious, because he craved power, he led to his own downfall. Haman is listed as one of the biblical characters who increased his wealth to his own detriment.²⁰⁷ Others suggest Haman was punished because of his idolatrous practices of enchantment.²⁰⁸

The Rabbis read into the language of the text to learn that Haman was destined to be punished by God's wrath because he chose to annihilate His people. Haman is one of four biblical characters who began with *af* and perished by *af*, which means both "also" and "wrath." In Esther 5:12 it is written, "Yea (*af*), Esther the queen did not let any man come in."²⁰⁹

Numbers Rabbah teaches that because Haman sought to kill all the Jews, together with their children, and because he set out to plunder their wealth, and because he sought to hang Mordechai, for all these reasons, he

²⁰⁶ Genesis Rabbah 16:4.

²⁰⁷ Genesis Rabbah 19:1, Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:18:1.

²⁰⁸ Sanhedrin 105a.

²⁰⁹ Esther Rabbah 9:3.

obtained measure for measure. He and his sons died a violent death, and Mordechai took his wealth. "Woe unto the idolaters, for they will not learn a lesson! From what the Holy One, blessed be He had done to the earlier nations, the later ones did not learn."²¹⁰

The following midrashim, which tend to be from the middle Amoraic period, teach that Haman's punishment was not due to his own wicked ways. Rather, it serves as a delayed punishment, initially assigned to his wicked predecessors. The later collection of Esther Rabbah teaches that God might take a long time to "even the score" and appropriately punish the wicked, but eventually He always exacts proper retribution. For example, it is taught that this Shushan story is in fact the punishment due to Joseph's brothers, who ate and drank while he suffered in the pit, and for their selling Joseph into slavery.²¹¹ Likewise, Numbers Rabbah uses a hermeneutical device of counting verses to link the punishment of the serpent of Eden to the punishment of Haman.²¹²

The later Rabbis often relate Haman to his wicked ancestor Amalek. Thereby, they apply what they know of God's will for Amalek to better understand His plan for Haman. For example, God wanted to destroy and cut off the line of Amalek, because God saw that in the future there would arise a man from Agag and he would be a great enemy of the Jews. His name would be Haman. But Saul chose to leave a remnant of the Amalekite people. God determined that Mordechai, from the line of Saul, would complete the work his ancestor left incomplete.²¹³

²¹⁰ Numbers Rabbah 10:2.

²¹¹ Esther Rabbah 7:25.

²¹² Numbers Rabbah 14:12.

²¹³ Pirke deRabi Eliezer 49, a parallel is found in Pesikta Rabbati 13:8.

Pesikta Rabbati stands out when it teaches that God sent Haman to Israel as a form of punishment. However, His will to destroy the line of Amalek was greater than His desire to teach Israel a lesson. God said to Israel, "Even though you angered Me so much that the wicked one (Haman) had to be brought upon you, nevertheless, it is for Me to pluck up by the root the last of Amalek's line." God determined it appropriate to be as cruel to Haman as He was to Amalek, because He foresaw the doom which they both willed against Israel.²¹⁴

Here, too, it becomes apparent that the Tanaim and early Amoraim are interested in how divine retribution comes in response to sinful choices made by the human will. They are not considered sinful because they are determined by the human will. They are sinful because they do not agree with God's will. In contrast, the Amoraim of the middle period produced interpretations which reflect their broader understanding of God's role in the human political destiny. God completed His political struggle with Amalek by exacting punishment on Haman his descendent. The later Rabbis imagine that God did not consider Haman to be an individual, who makes his own mistakes, and must pay the consequences, as do their rabbinic predecessors. Rather, they believe God views Haman to be an extension of Israel's early enemy, Amalek. God saw them as two parts of the same political destiny.

A Battle of the Wills

Just as Pharaoh and Bilaam engaged in a power struggle with God, Haman posed a similar threat. Whenever an enemy of Israel rises to assume political power over His people, God is sure to respond swiftly. To challenge God's political power is to challenge His divinity, because God is Ruler over

²¹⁴ Pesikta Rabbati 13:7.

all, including Israel's political destiny. Similarly, God and Israel are bound so tightly together, that those who threaten Israel, threaten God and those who praise Israel, praise God.

Haman reasoned, "Pharaoh was foolish to only rule against the baby boys of Israel. I will rule against all of Israel." God warned Haman, "You are powerless next to Me. How foolish! My might will go forth and battle against yours. I will send out My angels, thunder, lightning, and more."²¹⁵ Similarly, God told Haman well in advance, "You cast an evil eye on Israel's festivals. I will overthrow you and they will observe an additional festival for your downfall. It will be called Purim."²¹⁶ Furthermore, according to Rabbi Samuel, God asked Haman just as He asked Amalek, "Haven't you heard about what I did in Egypt to make Pharaoh suffer? As you live, someone will teach you a lesson by calling you to the gallows" (through Mordechai, God would teach Haman the lesson).²¹⁷

Unfortunately Israel was the one who got caught in the crossfire as both Haman and God tried to assert their control in a battle of wills. Israel cried out to God, "We are caught. We are like a thirsty wolf who finds a well with a net draped over the top of it. If we practice idolatry, we are punished by You and if we do not, we are killed by Haman."²¹⁸ Whenever Haman made a command and God did not, Haman's command was fulfilled. However, as soon as God made a command, Haman's words were broken.²¹⁹

²¹⁵ Esther Rabbah 7:23.

²¹⁶ Esther Rabbah 7:12.

²¹⁷ Pesikta Rabbati 12:11.

²¹⁸ Esther Rabbah 7:6.

²¹⁹ Esther Rabbah 7:22.

In this parable the Rabbis make clear that God has power over any human ruler, but they also admit that even God does not presume to have power over the human will. Haman is likened to a bird, who built its nest on the edge of the sea. The sea swept the nest away and the bird called out, "I will not leave until I make the land into sea and the sea into land." The bird was determined and moved bits of dust and water back and forth in its beak. Its friend said, "What difference will all your efforts make?" Similarly, God said to the wicked Haman, "Stupid fool! I said that I would destroy Israel, and even I was not able²²⁰...and you want to destroy them? By your life, your head will be taken off instead of theirs, since they are to be saved and you to be hanged."²²¹

The greatest insult to the enemy of Israel is when the Rabbis assert that Haman was raised to greatness only to make his fall greater. He is likened to lambs which are fattened, not for their own benefit, but only for the sake of their slaughter.²²² Haman was brought to greatness only for his own detriment. He is likened to a soldier who cursed the king's son. The king imagined, "If I kill him, people will say, 'He executed a common soldier!'" Therefore, he reasoned to make him an officer, then a commander, and only then did he kill him. God imagined, "If I kill Haman as an advisor, no one would know him. Let him become great, then he will be hanged. This will show how My enemies become great only to fall."²²³

Even though God's name is not mentioned in it, the message of Megillat Esther is clear – faith in God rules over any government. The Rabbis

²²⁰ This statement refers to the time when Moses interceded on Israel's behalf after their worshipping the Golden Calf.

²²¹ Esther Rabbah 7:10.

²²² Esther Rabbah 7:1.

²²³ Esther Rabbah 7:2, Sifre deAgadeta al Megilat Esther shares similar themes.

look to Mordechai to learn how they can express their faith while living under foreign rule. They debate whether Haman or Mordechai initiated their rivalry. Mordechai refused to temporize. The later Rabbis make a strong statement when they say, "Mordechai should have flattered the wicked Haman. Israel was almost obliterated from the earth because of the way Mordechai antagonized Haman."²²⁴

Some say Mordechai started the quarrel with Haman, because Mordechai saw Haman make himself an object of idolatrous worship. Others say Haman quarreled with Mordechai because he would not bow down before him.²²⁵ Haman embroidered an idol onto his robe, so that all would bow down before an image.²²⁶ Mordechai saw it and refused to bow down. This infuriated Haman, especially because he knew how the Jews had hated his ancestors for generations. Therefore, he went to the king and explained that the Jews do not fulfill the will of the king. Haman offered a bribe to Achashuarus. He said, "Take half of my wealth and give me power over the Jewish people."²²⁷

But when Haman said to Achashuarus, "Let's exterminate the Jews," the king replied, "You cannot prevail against them, because their God will not entirely forsake them. Look at what He did to the kings who preceded me and they were much more powerful than we are today. Whoever schemes against Israel, is wiped out. I don't want to hear another word about it." But Haman persisted. The king finally suggested, "Why don't you inquire from the wise men and magicians of the court?" The magicians declared to all the

²²⁴ Tanchuma Yelamdenu, Vayechi 6.

²²⁵ Megillah 19a.

²²⁶ Esther Rabbah 7:5.

²²⁷ Pirke deRabi Eliezer 49.

nations, "If you destroy Israel, the world cannot stand, for it stands only through the merit of the Law given to Israel. The God who is near to Israel, rules over those above and below. Every living soul is in His hand to raise up or cast down, to kill or to bring to life." Haman was unwilling to hear the warnings of the king and his court, who knew that God is the ultimate Ruler. Haman persisted, "The God of Israel is old. He may have drowned Pharaoh, but what did he do to Nebuchadnezzar? Now His people are all scattered. He is weak."²²⁸

The Rabbis teach that God's power over the Jewish people rests in His ability to make His will compelling to His people. It is taught that Mordechai smiled when overhearing the voices of children studying Torah. Haman asked, "Why are you smiling?" "Because the verses they recite are good tidings. I no longer fear your scheme." Haman determined, "Those children will be the first among your people that I will kill."²²⁹ Haman wanted to prove his will to be superior to God's will, but when God and the Jewish people create a partnership of wills they cannot be defeated.

The following midrashim show how the later Rabbis view Israel's political destiny to be determined on a cosmic level. God, the angels, the luminaries, and Israel's ancestors all participate in determining the future of human history. Haman instructed King Achashuarus, "The God of Israel hates lewdness. So make a banquet. The Jewish people will attend and misbehave." When Mordechai heard this news, he wrote a proclamation saying, "Do not attend the king's party. They are only inviting us so that the Attribute of Justice will have an accusation to bring before God." But Israel did not listen to his warnings. Eighteen thousand, five hundred Jewish

²²⁸ Esther Rabbah 7:13.

²²⁹ Ibid.

people attended the king's party. They ate and drank and misconducted themselves. In turn, Satan accused them before God, "How long will You cleave to this nation who turns its heart and faith away from You? Destroy them because they do not repent." God asked Satan, "What will become of My Torah?" Satan replied, "Be content with the angels." Surprisingly, God was convinced and consented to destroy Israel. "Bring Me My scroll and I will write on it the doom of extermination." Satan brought the scroll and God wrote down the doom. Then Torah, dressed like a widow, came weeping before God: "Sovereign of the Universe, if Israel is gone, what is the purpose for us in the world?" The sun and the moon overheard this and gathered in their light. Elijah ran to the patriarchs and to Moses and said, "Why are you oblivious to what is being determined? Hurry! Come to Israel's defense!" The patriarchs said simply, "If Israel has transgressed God's law, and their doom is sealed, what can we do?" Elijah turned to Moses and asked, "How many times did you save Israel?" Moses answered, "Is there a virtuous man in that generation?" "Yes, Mordechai is his name." "Go and tell him to pray there and I will pray here and together maybe we will receive mercy from God for Israel." "But the doom is already sealed!" Moses asked, "Is it sealed in clay or in blood?" "In clay." Then our prayers will be heard. If it were already sealed in blood, then what must be would be."²³⁰

For every charge Haman made against Israel below, Michael pleaded in their defense above. He said, "God, Your sons are accused not because of idolatry nor bloodshed, but because they are keeping Your laws." God promised Michael, "I swear to you, I will not forsake them. Whether or not

²³⁰ Ibid.

they are guilty, it is impossible to forsake them, because the world cannot dispense with Israel."²³¹

All of the midrashim recorded in this section come from the later period. Just as Pharaoh and Bilaam are depicted as threats to God and therefore, defeated, so is Haman depicted. The later Rabbis are more interested in God's role in broad politics, while the earlier Rabbis maintain that political realities are developed by the wills of individuals and their relationships with God.

A Partnership of Wills

As shown in chapters one and two, the Rabbinic ideal throughout the ages is for the human will to mirror the divine will. The following midrashim describe Mordechai and Esther's heroism to have resulted from their willingness to discover God's will and to fulfill it.

Rabbi Levi ben Chana says in the name of Rabbi Chanina that Mordechai and Esther caused Bigthan and Teresh to be hanged. Their free actions created an opportunity for God to step in with a miracle. However, there should be no doubt – the Holy One, blessed be He, caused the enemy to fall.²³²

Communication is needed for any good partnership. It is taught that because of the prayers which Esther and all the other women offered, all the sons of Amalek were killed and their women remained childless and widowed²³³. Likewise, Mordechai did not withhold his opinion from God. He demanded, "You promised Abram offspring as many as the stars in the

²³¹ Esther Rabbah 7:12.

²³² Ecclesiastes Rabbah 4:9:1.

²³³ Pirke deRabi Eliezer 49, parallel found in Pesikta Rabbati 13:8.

skies and now You are sending them off like sheep to the slaughter. Remember your covenants with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob!"²³⁴ It is even suggested that sometimes God depends on the leaders of Israel to help Him maintain His position of power. According to one interpretation, one night God observed Israel's grave distress. The King of Kings was so upset that He became unsteady, fell off of His throne, and fled. Mordechai called out to Him and said, "Blessed is God who has not let any of His words fall to the earth, to fulfill that which is said in Deuteronomy, 'But You shall tread upon their high places'" and God reclaimed His throne.²³⁵

Esther Rabbah provides examples of how the communication was equally appreciated when it traveled from God to His human partners. Mordechai received the hints God sent out to him. He would walk every day before Esther's court²³⁶ and think to himself, "How is it possible that this righteous maiden should be married to an uncircumcised man? It must be because some great calamity is going to befall Israel and they will be delivered through her."²³⁷ Mordechai knew, as many of the leaders of Israel knew, how to notice signs of God's will. Another example – Mordechai understood that God had chosen him for his task, because he was a descendent of the tribe of Benjamin. He explained, "God has chosen me, because Haman's ancestors (the Amalekites) bowed down to mine."²³⁸

Conclusions

²³⁴ Pirke deRabi Eliezer 49.

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Esther 11:11.

²³⁷ Esther Rabbah 6:6.

²³⁸ Esther Rabbah 7:8.

The Rabbis may have been divided over whether or not and to what extent God controls the lives of individuals. However, when it comes to the destiny of the world, and Israel's political destiny in particular, the Rabbis were united in the belief that God has a plan. Both the Tanaim and Amoraim throughout the Rabbinic period produce midrashim which support the opinion that politics are determined by divine providence. However, the midrashim which favor the belief that political developments rely on the free will of human beings, are mostly limited to the Tanaitic and early Amoraic periods. The middle Amoraim do not find this opinion compelling and do not often repeat such interpretations written by their predecessors.

The Tanaim and the early Amoraim maintain their beliefs in the free will of human beings, but leave room for the possibility of God's interfering at select critical moments. To put it differently, they believe that God has a "deep plan" for the universe, and for Israel's future in particular, but that God is interested in and respectful of an individual's right to choose another, even opposing path. For this reason, many midrashim about divine retribution spring from the earlier period. Without freedom of choice, there is no need for reward or punishment. Despite the self motivated wills of individuals, God will always ensure that His political plan is ultimately realized.

In contrast, the Amoraim of the middle period often express the belief that God manipulates the words, deeds, and emotions of individuals, so that they behave against their will. Such interpretations are seldom found in the earlier works. The later Rabbis are less likely to understand retribution to be in reaction to one's own deeds, but rather, in reaction to the sins of one's ancestors. (It seems likely that the theme of reward for the sake of the ancestors' merits would be prominent in the later rabbinic literature.) This

idea is closely linked to the belief that all of Israel's history is one continuum. The later Rabbis understood Israel's political destiny to be determined on a more widespread, more global level. On the other hand, the earlier Rabbis describe the unfolding of history to be comprised of many unique relationships between God and individuals.

The Amoraim of the middle period treated the enemies of Israel as threats to the Kingship and the Kingdom of God. When the will of God clashes with the will of a political figure, God takes on the challenger as one who has set out to dethrone Him. The earlier Rabbis did not speak in these terms. It seems likely that the contrast is due to a shift in the Rabbis' own political realities.

Conclusion

Throughout the literature the Rabbis renew their discussion of free will and divine providence, with the influence of new trends from within and without. The shifts in rabbinic thought, especially between the early and middle Amoraic periods, can be linked to historical, philosophical, and religious developments.

The rabbinic interpretations of the first three chapters of Genesis show that the Tanaim and the Amoraim alike recognized that God imbued humankind with two inclinations and a natural drive towards increasing wisdom. These attributes are the basic foundation for human free will. On the other hand, the Rabbis were consistent in their belief that God can and does indirectly cause events to play out according to His plan. It is noted in chapter two that more of these midrashim which favor God's ability to manipulate events are produced during the middle Amoraic period.

While comments from both the Tanaitic and Amoraic periods express a belief in God's omniscience, the earlier midrashim maintain that God's omniscience and human free will are not mutually exclusive. They carefully walk the line – sometimes more successfully than others – so that both values may be simultaneously true. The later Rabbis, however, are clear in their conviction that omniscience necessitates divine providence.

While the Rabbis of every generation uphold the Torah and its commandments as the tie that binds Israel to God, the later midrashim depict an ever-increasing gap between God and humanity. The system of commandments is meant to be a compromise between providence and free will. God makes His will known and individuals, by their good and evil inclinations and wisdom, can choose to pursue it or not, and then pay the

consequences of reward or punishment. A rabbinic system of commandments, retribution, and repentance consistently necessitates human free will.

The change in rabbinic thought comes in terms of the relationship between God and Israel. The Tanaim and the early Amoraim described a partnership, in which both partners were powerful and directed, loving and respectful of one another. The later Amoraim, however, depict a more distanced relationship, in which God often dictates an unpleasant future for the individual. God was seen as an impatient, erratic senior partner, who has little regard for the expectations of his very humble junior partner.

Chapter three draws similar conclusions. For the Rabbis, God's relationship with Moses is the quintessential model of a human-divine relationship. Again, the early midrashim understand the relationship to be intimate and respectful. God is interested in Moses' opinion, and cares about what Moses has to say. But the midrashim which follow emphasize a tense distance between them. God has no interest in the personal needs of His prophets, who are left to feel only humility and fear as they fulfill the will of their Master.

When it comes to choices of vocation and romance, the Rabbis were relatively pragmatic. Of course, their own life experiences showed them that there is little choice when it comes to such matters. The popular belief was that the way by which one makes a living and the person with whom one builds a family had little to do with talent or personal preference. Such matters were determined by God. However, the few midrashim which do see free choice in these areas are produced by the earlier commentators. And those which view God as a divine matchmaker are more prevalent in the later collections of midrashim.

The Tanaim and early Amoraim recognized God's ability to fashion the details of individual lives, but they believed God restrains Himself from such involvement except at critical moments. Often the early Rabbis had to develop very complex interpretations in order to uphold their belief. By contrast, the Rabbis of the middle Amoraic period were more willing to take the biblical accounts of God's involvement more literally, requiring simpler explanations. They believed that God can and often does intercede to dictate an individual's thoughts, actions, or surrounding events in order to realize His plan.

The Rabbis were consistent in their certainty that God has a grand plan for the universe and that He ultimately determines all political history. Through their treatment of the biblical accounts of Pharaoh, Bilaam, the covenant between the pieces, and Haman, it becomes clear that there was a shift in thought around the year 640 C.E. The earlier midrashim suggest that God has a "deep plan" for His world, but that He considers the needs and choices of individuals as time passes. God is willing to alter the specifics of His plan in order to incorporate the will of the individual. It was thought that there are an infinite number of ways to fulfill God's plan and that God is open to all of them, so that humankind can participate in the evolution of history.

On the other hand, the later generations of Rabbis seldom repeated the interpretations of their predecessors when it came to political destiny. Instead they constructed new midrashim to show how God manipulates individuals to act, even against their will, in order to fulfill His plan. There was less value placed on the individual in this period. Individuals were expendable, so long as politics and history unfolded on the global level as God saw fit.

Similarly, while the earlier Rabbis understood that individuals were deserving of reward or punishment for their own actions, the later Rabbis more strongly emphasized the role of the merit and shame of one's ancestors' actions. For example, the events in Shushan were fixed to finally exact proper retribution for what Amalek did generations earlier. The earlier Rabbis tended to see the enemies of Israel acting as individuals with individual motivations of greed and hatred, while the later Rabbis depicted the enemies of Israel as actual threats to God and God's unique position. Again, the shift in attitude reflects a change in the way the individual and his will were valued as well as a change in how the interplay between God's realm and the human realm were perceived.

When one considers the historical settings which framed and informed rabbinic thought, most significant are the political changes that took place when the early Amoraic period shifted to the middle Amoraic period, around the year 640 C.E. At this point, Jews were no longer under Roman rule, but under Christian and Muslim rule. The relationship between the Jews and their governments changed significantly when governance was not only politically charged, but also religiously motivated. Rome oppressed and persecuted the Jewish people for purely political reasons. For the most part, Jews living under Roman or Babylonian rule were allowed to pray and study as they pleased, and synagogues and academies flourished. By contrast, under Christian and Muslim rule, Jews were persecuted for religious reasons, and restrictions were made on their religious practices, beginning with Pope Gregory's papal policy in 600 C.E. After eighty years of anti-Jewish legislation and persecutions, Judaism itself was outlawed in 694 in Visigothic Spain.

Messianic movements and the Karaite traditions tore at the fabric of mainstream Judaism in the mid-700's under Islam.

It was difficult enough for the Rabbis to rationalize the persecutions they suffered under Rome and the exile they suffered in Babylonia. They believed God was punishing them like a loving parent for the sinful choices they made. The belief that God maintains intimate relationships with individuals and takes their feelings into consideration could be upheld when their oppressors only made claims of military might. When the Muslim and Christian governments understood their political power as a sign of their chosenness over Israel, it became more difficult to rationalize that their suffering was somehow the will of God.

As chapter one points out, the Rabbis rejected and incorporated Greek, Roman, and Babylonian philosophy into their own. Secular philosophies were not as threatening as opposing religious thought. The Rabbis did also respond to Christian and Muslim thought; however, when they were tortured because of their faith in God and because of their devotion to His will, they ran out of explanations. Perhaps their only choice was to re-examine their belief in how God does or does not involve himself in the world. They were forced to hold God at a distance. God was then considered as One who cannot be understood, One who is to be feared, because His power and will are strict and beyond comprehension.

The Amoraim were also left to mistrust their own sense of power and control under Christian and Muslim rule. The Tanaim and earlier Amoraim had confidence in their own abilities to make change, to lead, to impact the world around them. With the shift in political power, the Amoraim of the middle period lost that confidence. They no longer saw themselves as real partners with God, but rather as weak pawns, who could only hope to

somehow appease their Master and avert any further suffering. It is then no surprise that the predominant understanding of free will and providence shifts back to confidence in the human will when the Jewish scholars under medieval Muslim rule were granted political and religious freedom.

It is important to note that this study did not uncover a single principle which was elevated to the level of systematic doctrine and projected itself on to everything that succeeded it. Neither was there found an attempt to reconcile the conflicting "facts" in any orderly fashion. The Rabbis did not reject the possibility of either free will or providence, nor did they retreat from the resulting contradiction, because their goal was not to find a smooth philosophical solution, but to activate all of the potential powers available to humankind. They wanted to claim the possibility of human freedom, the will to contribute to the world, but also the possibility of dependence on a reliable, omnipotent God. All this was motivated by their religious thought, which was equally concerned with God and humanity.

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