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Revelation, Identity and Covenant

A Series of Six Text Studies for Shavuot

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Introduction

This study pack contains a series of texts for adults to study either during the Omer period from Pesach to Shavuot or on the evening of Shavuot itself. Texts 1 and 2 introduce midrashim which describe aspects of the revelation at Mount Sinai and have strong connections (either in motif or in the use of verses) to Text 3. Text 3 contains the famous Talmudic account of Mount Sinai being held over the Israelites’ head accompanied by God’s threat of ‘accept or die’. Text 4 explores a midrash which utilises the same verse from the Book of Esther as found in Text 3 but to a slightly different effect. Finally, Texts 5 and 6 contain later commentaries on Text 3 by Ramban and Maharal respectively.

There is no ‘Text 7’, you could incorporate Levinas’ reading of the Talmudic text ‘Temptation of Temptations’ as a particularly modern interpretation of Text 3. Alternatively, there are plenty of other directions in which the conversation can be taken: how we understand revelation and the role Torah has in our lives; the variety of texts that describe the voluntary acceptance of the covenant at Sinai; how the texts relate to us in the 21st Century with multiple identities and seemingly endless choice in defining who we are; how we seek and discover our own adult theology; the nature of individual autonomy; in fact the list could go on and on...

Some of the texts are quite dense and complex and may take some unpacking. To help, each text is first presented, along with some of the quoted biblical verses and some background to the text and the sages mentioned. There then follows a step by step commentary on the flow of the text. Finally, some discussion notes, questions and concluding ideas are offered, in case there is not enough material already.

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Text 1: Pesikta de Rav Kahana 12:6 – Witness to Revelation

אֲנִי הַגַּדְתִּי וְהוֹשַׁעְתִּי וְהִשְׁמַעְתִּי וְאֵין בְּכֶם זֶר וְאַתֶּם עֵדֵי נַאֲם ה' וְאֵין אֵל (ישעיה מו: יב). אֲנִי הַגַּדְתִּי, בְּמִצְרַיִם, וַיְגַד מֹשֶׁה לְאַהֲרֹן אֶת כָּל דְּבָרֵי ה' (שְׁמוֹת ד: כח). וְהוֹשַׁעְתִּי, בַּיָּם, וַיּוֹשַׁע ה' בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא (שְׁמוֹת יד: ל). וְהִשְׁמַעְתִּי, בְּסִינַי מִשְׁמַיִם הִשְׁמַעְתָּ דִּין (תְּהִלִּים עו: ט). וְאֵין בְּכֶם זֶר, זֶה יִתְרוֹ, וְאַתֶּם עֵדֵי נַאֲם ה' וְאֵין אֵל. תִּנִּי ר' שְׁמַע' בֶּן יוֹחִי אִם אַתֶּם עֵדֵי נַאֲם ה', אֲנִי אֵל, וְאִם אֵין אַתֶּם עֵדֵי כְּבִיכּוֹל אֵין אֲנִי ה'.

I alone have declared, I have saved, I have announced and there is not amongst you any strange [god] and you are my witness, says the Eternal One, and I am God. (Isaiah 43:12). I alone have declared, in Egypt, And Moses told to Aaron all the words of the Eternal One (Exodus 4:28). I have saved, by the sea, And on the day the Eternal One saved (Exodus 14:30). I have announced, at Sinai, You caused the law to be heard from heaven (Psalm 76:9). And there is not amongst you any stranger, this is Jethro. And you will be my witness says the Eternal one and I am God. Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai taught: If you are my witness, says the Eternal One, I am God, and if you are not my witness, it is, as it were, I am not the Eternal One.

Biblical Verses

It is always important to look at the whole verse referenced in a rabbinic text. They are provided below for you to save some work, but keeping a Tanakh (Hebrew Bible) to hand whilst you study is helpful. Sometimes the preceding or following verses have an impact too. We should assume that the creators of the midrashim and rabbinic literature had memorised the Bible and could quote verses by heart.

אֲנִי הַגַּדְתִּי וְהוֹשַׁעְתִּי וְהִשְׁמַעְתִּי וְאֵין בְּכֶם זֶר וְאַתֶּם עֵדֵי נַאֲם ה' וְאֵין אֵל :

I alone have declared, I have saved, I have announced and there is not amongst you any strange [god] and you are my witness, says the Eternal One, and I am God.

Isaiah 43:12

וַיְגַד מֹשֶׁה לְאַהֲרֹן אֶת כָּל דְּבָרֵי ה' וְהוֹשַׁעְתִּי וְהִשְׁמַעְתִּי וְאֵין בְּכֶם זֶר וְאַתֶּם עֵדֵי נַאֲם ה' וְאֵין אֵל :

Moses told to Aaron all the words of the Eternal One with which he had sent him and all the signs with which he had instructed him.

Exodus 4:28

וַיּוֹשַׁע ה' בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל מִיַּד מִצְרַיִם וַיִּרְא יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת מִצְרַיִם מֵת עַל שְׂפַת הַיָּם :

On that day, the Eternal One saved Israel from the hand of the Egyptians and Israel saw the Egyptians die on the shores of the sea.

Exodus 14:30

מִשְׁמַיִם הִשְׁמַעְתָּ דִּין אֶרֶץ יִרְאַה וְשָׁקְטָה :

You caused the law to be heard from heaven; the earth feared and was still.

Psalm 76:9

Vocabulary

Hebrew	English
אדנאי	An abbreviation for Adonai – often translated as Lord or Eternal One. The name of God spelt 'yud', 'hey', 'vav', hey'
אזר	'strange'. In the biblical verse the translation implies 'one that is strange' (i.e. possibly in the context – a god). However in the midrash the meaning has shifted to someone who is a stranger or perhaps more specifically who worships strange gods (i.e. Jethro, Moses' father-in-law).
דין	In this specific midrash the word דין which means law is understood to mean the Torah. It is not uncommon for midrashim to interpret words in this way. For example, when the Book of Proverbs refers to wisdom it is frequently considered to be some sort of primordial Torah in midrashim.
תנא	Taught – an Aramaic word whose root corresponds to the Hebrew שנה from which the word Mishnah is derived. תנא indicates that the teaching is attributed to the Tannaitic period (approximately the first two centuries of the common era). In this case, taught by the <i>tanna</i> (sage from the tannaitic period) Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai.

Personalities

Knowing who is referred to in the texts is sometimes useful. There is a rich academic debate about whether attributions to sages can be considered to be 'true' in a historical way and how to reconstruct biographies of sages and how to use stories about them. However, leaving the debate slightly to one side, sometimes a picture of a sage and his opinions is painted by the various texts. Whether this is a true reflection of the sage or a true reflection of the late editorial activity that influenced rabbinic literature is perhaps less important than noticing the phenomenon itself.

Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai – a fourth generation *tanna* and was a student of Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai is described in the Babylonian Talmud as being critical of the Roman Empire and, as a result, had to flee to live in a cave with his son for 13 years. According to mystical tradition, he was the author of the Zohar – a kabbalistic work probably written in 13th Century Spain. His *yarzheit* (day of his death) is considered by some to be Lag B'Omer (18th Iyyar) and his burial place Mount Meron in Israel.

About Pesikta de Rav Kahana

This is a homiletic midrash which probably dates from around the 5th Century – a similar period to Genesis Rabbah and the Yerushalmi Talmud. The order of the midrash is based on the Torah readings for the Jewish Holidays and special Sabbaths. Though no copy of the midrash was known about, Leopold Zunz (in 1832) demonstrated the likely existence of the text based on references and readings in Rabbinic literature. He proposed that there were 29 chapters beginning with Chapter One, on Rosh Hashanah, and followed by chapters on the holidays and special Sabbaths of the year. In 1868 Solomon Buber discovered four manuscripts of the text and produced a version of the collection that was slightly different in structure and content to that which was proposed by Zunz. Zunz had performed a marvellous feat of scholarly work in hypothesising the existence of a text that was ultimately found, but now it had been discovered it did not exactly match the manuscripts. However,

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what has been shown since Buber's discovery based on older manuscripts is that Zunz's reconstruction of the text was actually correct.

Mechanics of the Midrash

What follows is an attempt to guide you through the midrash step by step, taking in the way in which the midrash plays on words and creates meaning. Not only will we focus on the content but also on its form and structure:

This chapter of Pesikta de Rav Kahana contains a series of midrashim for the festival reading on the first day of Shavuot – the reading is the Ten Commandments in Exodus, beginning with Exodus 19:1. The style of this particular midrash is to move from an opening verse unconnected to the Torah reading and to move back to the reading itself – it is sometimes known as a homiletic midrash. The opening verse, taken from Prophets or Writings (i.e. not from the Five Books of Moses), is known as the *Peticha*.

Text	Translation	Notes
אנכי הגדתי והושעתי והשמעתי ואין בכם זר ואתם עדיי נאם ה' ואני אל (ישעיה מג: יב).	I alone have <u>declared</u> , I have <u>saved</u> , I have <u>announced</u> and there is not amongst you any strange [god] and you are my witness, says the Eternal One, and I am God. (Isaiah 43:12).	This is the opening verse – the peticha – of the midrash. Note the various clauses to the verse which will be elaborated upon below.
אנכי הגדתי, במצרים, ויגד משה לאהרן את כל דברי ה' (שמות ד: כח).	I alone have <u>declared</u> , in Egypt, And Moses <u>told</u> to Aaron all the words of the Eternal One (Exodus 4:28).	Clause 1: Declaration. The verb in the peticha verse and the verse from Exodus is from the same root – נגד – to tell. Thus making the connection between the two and suggesting the declaration in Isaiah is a reference to God's communication to Moses whilst the still enslaved in Egypt.
והושעתי, בים, ויושע ה' ביום ההוא (שמות יד: ל).	I have <u>saved</u> , by the sea, And on the day the Eternal One <u>saved</u> (Exodus 14:30).	Clause 2: Saved. The verb in the peticha verse and the verse from Exodus have the same root – ישע – to save. The connection between the salvation in Isaiah is made to the redemption at the Sea of Reeds.
והשמעתי, בסיני משמים השמעת דין (תהלים עו: ט).	I have <u>announced</u> , at Sinai, You caused the law to be <u>heard</u> from heaven (Psalm 76:9).	Clause 3: Hearing. The verb in the peticha verse and the verse from Psalm 76 have the same root – שמע – hear/listen. The connection is made from Isaiah to Psalms to the revelation at Sinai.
ואין בכם זר, זה יתרו,	And there is not amongst you any stranger, this is Jethro.	Clause 4: This clause implies that a stranger is someone who is not part of the covenant and explains why Jethro departs in Exodus 18:27.
ואתם עדיי נאם ה' ואני אל. תני ר' שמעי בן יוחי אם אתם עדי נאם ה', אני אל, ואם אין אתם עדיי כביכול אין אני ה'.	And you will be my witness says the Eternal one and I am God. Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai taught: If you are my witness, says the Eternal One, then I am God, and if you are not my witness, it is, as it were, that I am not the Eternal One.	Clause 5 and 6: Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai plays with the meaning of the letter 'vav' that begins 'אתם' and 'אני'. Instead of the usual meaning he changes the meaning to a paradosis and apodosis – if/then clause. Note, in particular, the change from the Isaiah verse in which God's name is אל to ה'. This brings the midrash back to the festival reading – 'I am the Eternal One your God' (i.e. the beginning of the Ten Commandments).

Brief Discussion of Text 1

As pointed out, the midrash ends with the opening words of the Ten Commandments (the reading of which this midrash is composed) – though the word for 'I' is אני (ani), whereas in the Ten Commandments it is אנכי (anochi). The opening word of the verse from Isaiah may have already provided a hint towards the direction that is taken in the end – since it begins with אני. Thus there is a circularity to the midrash which begins with the 'I' of God and ends with the 'I' of God.

Note the way in which the midrash moves from the first encounter with God as a people in slavery in Egypt (God address to Moses) and follows chronologically through to revelation, passing the crossing of the Sea of Reeds and Jethro's departure on the way. This is an exquisite example of how midrashim are also works of literature.

Questions**Something about the mechanics of the midrash:**

1. We noted above that the midrash follows the journey of the Children of Israel from slavery in Egypt, to crossing the Sea of Reeds and Revelation at Sinai. For each moment an extra verse from Exodus is used to illustrate the point, except the Revelation at Sinai. Why is the verse for clause 3 (השמעתי) not from the book of Exodus (or even from the Book of Deuteronomy where the Shema could have worked)? In Exodus 24:7 a famous verse נעשה ונשמע (we will do and we will obey – Exodus 24:7) occurs using the verb שמע. So why does the midrash 'only' use a reference in Psalms? If we assume it would have been possible then what rationale can you give to this verse over others?

Thinking about the themes in the midrash:

2. What is being witnessed that causes God to be Adonai?
3. Is there suggestion that, as it were, God is not? Or is it that God is not Adonai whom Moses encounters at the burning bush in Exodus 3? Or something else altogether?
4. What is the difference between God telling or declaring to Moses and God causing the divine voice to be heard?

Thinking about our lives as Jews:

5. When we reach Shavuot how do we experience and understand God's revelation and what do we testify to as Jews?

A Final Idea

The final verb is the one based on the root שמע which reminds us of the Shema itself. The last words of the Shema are אני יהוה אלהיכם. These last words are strongly indicated in the last words of the midrash אני ה'. These words are always tied to the next prayer about redemption which begins with the word אמת (truth). Perhaps the midrash is pointing to a time of future redemption, thus re-visioning Isaiah's words that we started with.

Text 2: Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael (Bachodesh 3) – The Encounter with God

ויתיצבו, נצפפו. [מלמד שהיו ישראל מתיראין מפני הזיקין מפני הזועות מפני הרעמים מפני הברקים הבאים. - בתחתית ההר]. מלמד שנתלש ההר ממקומו, וקרבו ועמדו תחת ההר, שנאמר (דברים ד יא) ותקרבו ותעמדון תחת ההר. עליהם מפורש בקבלה (שיר השירים ב יד) יונתי בחגוי הסלע בסתר המדרגה הראיני את מראיך השמיעיני את קולך כי קולך ערב ומראיך נאוה. הראיני את מראיך אלו שנים עשרה מצבה לשנים עשר שבטי ישראל; השמיעני את קולך, אלו עשרת הדברות; כי קולך ערב, לאחר הדברות; ומראיך נאוה, (ויקרא ט ה) ויקרבו כל העדה ויעמדו לפני ה'. רבי אליעזר אומר, על ים סוף הדבר אמור: הראיני את מראיך, (שמות יד יג) התיצבו וראו את ישועת ה'; השמיעני את קולך, (שמות יד י) וייראו מאד ויצעקו בני ישראל אל ה'; כי קולך ערב, (שמות ב כג) ויצעקו ותעל שועתם; ומראיך נאוה, (שמות ד ל - לא) ויעש האותות לעיני העם ויאמן העם. ד"א כי קולך ערב, על הים, (שמות טו א) אשירה לה' כי גאה גאה; ומראיך נאוה, (תהלים ח ג) מפי עוללים ויונקים יסדת עוז למען צורריך להשבית אויב ומתנקם.

They stood (Exodus 19:17) They huddled together, to teach that Israel was afraid on because of the onset of sparks, shaking, thunder, and lightening. Beneath the mountain (Exodus 19:17) to teach that the mountain was wrenched from its place and they drew near and stood beneath the mountain, as it says (Deuteronomy 4:11) They drew near and stood beneath the mountain. Concerning them it is explained in the received tradition (Song of Songs 2:14) O my dove, that art in the clefts of the rock, in the covert of the cliff, let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice; for sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely. 'Let me see thy countenance' – these are the 12 pillars for the twelve tribes of Israel. 'Let me hear thy voice' – these are the ten commandments; 'for your voice is sweet' – after the utterances, 'and your countenance is comely' and the whole congregation drew near and stood before the Eternal One (Leviticus 9:5).

Rabbi Eliezer said 'This matter was said concerning the Sea of Reeds': 'Let me see your countenance' *they stood and saw the salvation of the Eternal One (Exodus 14:13)*; 'Let me hear your voice' – *they were greatly afraid and the Children of Israel cried out to the Eternal One (Exodus 14:10)*; 'for your voice is sweet' *and they cried and their cry came up*; 'your countenance is comely' and he made signs in sight of the people and the people had faith (Exodus 4:30-31). Another explanation: 'Your voice is sweet' concerning the sea *I will sing to the Eternal One for He is highly exalted (Exodus 15:1)*; 'Your countenance is comely' *from out of the mouth of babes and sucklings you have found strength, because of your adversaries that you stay the enemy and the avenger. (Psalm 8:3)*

Biblical Verses

וַיְדַבֵּר אֶהָרֹן אֶת כָּל הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְהוָה אֶל מֹשֶׁה וַיַּעַשׂ הָאֹתוֹת לְעֵינֵי הָעָם: וַיֵּאֱמַן הָעָם וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ כִּי פָקַד יְהוָה אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְכִי רָאָה אֶת עֲנָיִם וַיִּקְדּוּ וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ:

Aaron spoke all the words which the Eternal One spoke to Moses and did the signs in sight of the people. The people believed and when they heard that the Eternal One took note of the Children of Israel and that He had seen their suffering, they bowed and bent low.

Exodus 4:30-31

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וּפְרָעָה הַקָּרִיב וַיִּשְׂאוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת עֵינֵיהֶם וַהֲנִיחָם מִצְרַיִם נֹסַע אַחֲרֵיהֶם וַיִּירָאוּ מְאֹד וַיִּצְעֲקוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל יְהוָה :

When Pharaoh drew near the Children of Israel lifted their eyes and beheld the Egyptians were moving towards them and they were greatly afraid and the Children of Israel cried out to the Eternal One.

Exodus 14:10

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל הָעָם אַל תִּירָאוּ הִתְנַצְּבוּ וּרְאוּ אֶת יְשׁוּעַת יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה לָכֶם הַיּוֹם כִּי אֲשֶׁר רָאִיתֶם אֶת מִצְרַיִם הַיּוֹם לֹא תִסִּיפוּ לִרְאֹתָם עוֹד עַד עוֹלָם :

Moses said to the people, do not fear, gather together and behold the salvation of the Eternal One which he will do for you today, for as you saw the Egyptians today, you will no longer see them again forever.

Exodus 14:13

אִזּוּ יָשִׁיר מֹשֶׁה וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת לַיהוָה וַיֹּאמְרוּ לֵאמֹר אֲשִׁירָה לַיהוָה כִּי גָאָה גָאָה סוֹס וְרוֹכְבוֹ רָמָה בָּיָם :

Then sang Moses and the Children of Israel this song to the Eternal One, and spoke, saying: I will sing to the Eternal One, for He is highly exalted; the horse and his rider hath He thrown into the sea.

Exodus 15:1

וַיּוֹצֵא מֹשֶׁה אֶת־הָעָם לַקְּרֹאת הָאֱלֹהִים מִרְהַמְּחֹנֶה וַיִּתְנַצְּבוּ בְּתַחֲתֵית הַהָר :

Moses brought the people from the camp to meet God and they stood at the base of the mountain.

Exodus 19:17

וַיִּקְחוּ אֶת אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה מֹשֶׁה אֶל פְּנֵי אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וַיִּקְרְבוּ כָּל הָעֵדָה וַיַּעֲמֵדוּ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה :

And they brought that which Moses commanded to the opening of the tent of meeting and all the congregation drew near and stood before the Eternal One.

Leviticus 9:5

וַתִּקְרְבוּ וַתַּעֲמְדוּן תַּחַת הַהָר וְהָהָר בָּעַר בָּאֵשׁ עַד לֵב הַשָּׁמַיִם חֹשֶׁךְ עָנָן וְעָרְפָּל :

And you came near and stood under the mountain; and the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven, with darkness, cloud, and thick darkness.

Deuteronomy 4:11

מִפִּי עוֹלָלִים וְיִנְקִים יִסְדַּת עוֹ לְמַעַן צוֹרְרֵיךָ לְהַשְׁבִּית אוֹיֵב וּמְתַנְקָם :

Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings you have found strength, because of your adversaries that you stay the enemy and the avenger.

Psalms 8:3

יִנְתִּי בְחַגְוֵי הַסֶּלַע בְּסִתְרַי הַמַּדְרָגָה הִרְאִינִי אֶת מְרֹאֲיֶיךָ הַשְּׁמִיעֵנִי אֶת קוֹלְךָ כִּי קוֹלְךָ עָרֵב וּמְרֹאֲיֶיךָ נְאוּוָה :

O my dove, that art in the clefts of the rock, in the covert of the cliff, let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice; for sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely

Song of Songs 2:14

Vocabulary

Hebrew	English
תחת תחתית	Under, beneath, at the foot of.
עשרת הדברות	Ten Utterances – the rabbinic way to refer to the Ten Commandments (which aren't, after all, just ten commandments).

Personalities

Rabbi Eliezer – Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, known sometimes just as Rabbi Eliezer, was a tanna (of the Tannaitic period – the first two centuries of the Common Era) and student of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai. He is sometimes characterised as interpreting the biblical text in a more strict and literal way, though there is some debate over that characterisation amongst scholars today. He is the sage about whom the famous story of the 'Oven of Akhnai' focuses and as a result of the debate featured in that text he is excommunicated.

About Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael

Mekhilta is a word that means 'rule' or 'norm' and this Midrashic collection derives the halakha from the Bible through certain rules and norms. The Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael (of Rabbi Ishmael) is an halakhic midrash (and exegetical) on the book of Exodus, beginning with Exodus 12:1 – when the first command is issued to the Children of Israel. It is divided into nine tractates, one of which is called 'Bahodesh' – from which our midrash above is taken.

In the halakhic midrashim there is a division between what is known as the School of Rabbi Ishmael and the School of Rabbi Akiva. The modern identification of this division dates from the end of the 19th Century. There do seem to be technical differences in terminology. However, these differences may be more due to the redaction of the text later than the Schools of Rabbi Akiva and Ishmael themselves and are therefore not historically accurate attributes. Haggadic material is common to both schools, the differences lie in the interpretation of halakha. The Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael is attributed to the School of Rabbi Ishmael.

Mechanics of the Midrash

This midrash from Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael deals, as with last week's text, with the moment immediately preceding the revelation at Sinai. The midrash provides a commentary on the verse from Exodus 19:17. In particular, note the use of the Song of Songs as an 'intertext' – the verses from the Song of Songs help to interpret the verse from Exodus. However, in the continuation of the midrash, the focus moves from the revelation to the Sea of Reeds and Israel's redemption from Egypt (the Song of Songs is read during the festival of Pesach, so this shift is understandable) – this associative leap is made in the context of understanding exactly what the Song of Songs verse is referring to. The Song of Songs and its use in midrashic literature as an 'intertext' has been discussed by modern academics and it has been noted that sages either understand the Song of Songs to be referring to the crossing of the Sea of Reeds or the revelation at Mount Sinai.

Text	Translation	Notes
ויתיצבו, נצפפו.	<i>They stood</i> (Exodus 19:17) They huddled together	First the midrash seeks to explain the form of the verb ויתיצבו (the first word of the verse being interpreted). In some cases, this verb form is like a reflexive verb. Therefore, the meaning seems to be that they got themselves standing together – the midrash explains that they huddled together.
[מלמד שהיו ישראל מתיראין מפני הזיקין מפני הזועות מפני הרעמים מפני הברקים הבאים.]	to teach that Israel was afraid because of the onset of sparks, shaking, thunder, and lightening.	Now the midrash explains why they were covering in a group – because of fear at the time of revelation.
[בתחתית ההר] מלמד שנתלש ההר ממקומו, וקרבו ועמדו תחת ההר, שנאמר (דברים ד יא) ותקרבו ותעמדון תחת ההר.	<i>Beneath the mountain</i> (Exodus 19:17) to teach that the mountain was wrenched from its place and they drew near and stood beneath the mountain, as it says (Deuteronomy 4:11) <i>They drew near and stood beneath the mountain.</i>	The next words in the verse from Exodus 19:17 – ‘at the foot of the Mount’. Here a play on words is taking place – in the Hebrew the word for base/foot of the mountain is תחתית which might be more easily translated as under. Therefore, the midrash interprets this, using the verse from Deuteronomy as support, as if the Children of Israel literally stood under the mountain for protection (next week, we will revisit this motif in a famous text from the Babylonian Talmud).
מפורש עליהם בקבלה (שיר השירים ב יד) יונתי בחגוי הסלע בסתר המדרגה הראיני את מראיך השמיעני את קולך כי קולך ערב ומראיך נאוה.	Concerning them it is explained in the received tradition (Song of Songs 2:14) <i>O my dove, that art in the clefts of the rock, in the covert of the cliff, let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice; for sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely.</i>	Now the midrash turns to the Song of Songs to deepen the interpretation of what it meant for Israel to stand beneath Mount Sinai. The midrash will proceed to divide the verse into its different parts, offering an interpretation for each part. The scene is set in the beginning of the verse, which corresponds to Israel standing beneath the mountain – the dove [Israel] hidden in the cleft of the rock [Sinai]. Then the verse can be viewed as shifting perspectives between God and Israel.
הראיני את מראיך אלו שתים עשרה מצבה לשנים עשר שבטי ישראל;	‘Let me see thy countenance’ – these are the 12 pillars for the twelve tribes of Israel.	Part 1: God wants to see the countenance of the Children of Israel. He calls them from their hiding place under the mountain. The children of Israel are seen in the 12 pillars which correspond to the 12 tribes.
השמיעני את קולך, אלו עשרת הדברות;	‘Let me hear thy voice’ – these are the ten commandments;	Part 2: The Ten Commandments might better be translated as the 'Ten Utterances'. The children of Israel want to hear God's voice. This was the moment at which Israel heard the voice of God. Note, in the account of revelation in the Torah, the Children of Israel end up asking Moses to be an intermediary between themselves and God – because they are afraid.
כי קולך ערב, לאחר הדברות; ומראיך נאוה, (ויקרא ט ה) ויקרבו כל העדה ויעמדו	‘for your voice is sweet’ – after the utterances, ‘and your countenance is comely’ <i>and the whole</i>	Part 3: God's voice is heard and is considered to be sweet. Part 4: Shifting back to God's vision of the children of Israel – God sees the comely countenance in the whole congregation of

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לפני ה'.	<i>congregation drew near and stood before the Eternal One</i> (Leviticus 9:5).	Israel drawing near to stand before God. Note the repeated use of the root 'קרב' – it was also found in the discussion of Deuteronomy 4:11 (where it occurs). Note, this is no longer at the moment of revelation of the Ten Commandments but slightly in the future at the completion of the Tabernacle.
רבי אליעזר אומר, על ים סוף הדבר אמור:	Rabbi Eliezer said 'This matter was said concerning the Sea of Reeds':	Rabbi Eliezer offers a different point of view – arguing that the verse from the Song of Songs relates to the crossing of the Sea of Reeds. Again the children of Israel are in the cleft of the rock [beneath the waves] and the remainder of the verse is based on shifting perspectives of Israel and God.
הראיני את מראיך, (שמות יד יג) התיצבו וראו את ישועת ה';	'Let me see your countenance' <i>they stood and saw the salvation of the Eternal One</i> (Exodus 14:13);	Part 1: Whereas before this part of the verse was God's sight of Israel, here Israel is 'seeing' the salvation of God. The Children of Israel want to see God and they do.
השמיעני את קולך, (שמות יד יז) וייראו בני ישראל אל ה';	'Let me hear your voice' – <i>they were greatly afraid and the Children of Israel cried out to the Eternal One</i> (Exodus 14:10);	Part 2: The switch from the former interpretation continues. God wants to hear the voice of the Children of Israel and does so in the cry against their slavery.
כי קולך ערב, (שמות ב כג) ויזעקו ותעל שועתם;	'for your voice is sweet' <i>and they cried and their cry came up;</i>	Part 3: The sound of the Israelites' cry in slavery is sweet. There is a definite question here about how we feel about the cry of the enslaved being sweet.
ומראך נאוה, (שמות ד ל – לא) ויעש האותות לעיני העם ויאמן העם.	'your countenance is comely' and he made signs in sight of the people and the people had faith (Exodus 4:30-31).	Part 4: The miracles wrought before the Israelites, which affirm their faith, are the representation of God. Though note we are no longer at the Sea of Reeds but in the earlier encounter between God and the Israelites.
ד"א כי קולך ערב, על הים, (שמות טו א) אשירה להי כי גאה גאה;	Another explanation: 'Your voice is sweet' concerning the sea <i>I will sing to the Eternal One for He is highly exalted</i> (Exodus 15:1)	The midrash now introduces an alternative interpretation for the final part of the verse from the Song of Songs. The sweet voice refers to the moment at the Sea of Reeds with the song of the sea sung by the Israelites. This possibly offers a resolution to our former concern that the cry of the oppressed is sweet.
ומראך נאוה, (תהלים ח ג) מפי עוללים ויונקים יסדת עוז למען צורריך להשבית אויב ומתנקם.	'Your countenance is comely' <i>from out of the mouth of babes and sucklings you have found strength, because of your adversaries that you stay the enemy and the avenger.</i> (Psalm 8:3)	The 'appearance' of the Children of Israel is seen in what comes out of the mouths of children – thus mixing our senses of sight and sound.

Brief Discussion of Text 2

It is interesting to contrast the two different approaches as described by the midrash above. On the one hand, the text from the Song of Songs is read as describing the moment of revelation at Mount Sinai. On the other, the Song of Songs verse describes the moment at the crossing of the Sea of Reeds. At Sinai, the midrash moves between two aspects – God's vision of Israel and Israel's hearing of God's voice. At the sea the two aspects switch in terms of their senses: God now hears the voice of the Children of Israel and the Children of Israel see representations of God's power. The final anonymous 'דבר אחר' (davar acher - other interpretation) describes God hearing the song of the Children of Israel at the sea and the 'comely appearance' could actually be interpreted also as speech (i.e. 'Out of the mouths of babes...').

Questions

Something about the mechanics of the midrash:

1. The midrash moves from the mountain protecting the Israelites, to a description of the moment of revelation, to the crossing of the sea. How do you think these phases of the midrash function together?
2. In the first interpretation of the verse from the Song of Songs the 'countenance' is described as comely using a verse describing the Israelites from the book of Leviticus, which is a jump 'forward' in time from the revelation of the Ten Commandments. In the second interpretation, the 'countenance' is described as comely using a verse describing the miracles of God from the beginning of the book of Exodus, which is a jump 'back' in time from the moment of the parting of the Sea of Reeds. In what way do you think this might be a significant move by the midrash?

Thinking about the themes in the midrash:

3. How does the raised mountain change the moment of revelation, which was already an event imbued with enormous significance and great fear?
4. What is the difference between the auditory and visual senses as the means of encounter between God and Israel?

Thinking about our lives as Jews:

5. How do we talk about theology and the relationship between God and Israel? What senses are involved?
6. When we think of and discuss revelation, what do we describe being revealed (God, Torah, etc.)? How do we imagine the experience of revelation?

A Final Idea

There is an interesting psychological process of anxiety and assurance. The Children of Israel are fearful at Mount Sinai because of God's revelation. As the source of that fear, God lifts up the mountain to protect them and they are reassured. How do you see this anxiety, reassurance playing out in the midrash between God and Israel (possibly both ways)?

Text 3: Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 88a – Feeling Coerced

(שמות יט: יז) "ויתיצבו בתחתית ההר", אמר רב אבדימי בר חמא בר חסא: מלמד שכפה הקדוש ברוך הוא עליהם את ההר כגיגית, ואמר להם: אם אתם מקבלים התורה - מוטב, ואם לאו - שם תהא קבורתכם. אמר רב אחא בר יעקב: מכאן מודעא רבה לאורייתא. אמר רבא: אף על פי כן, הדור קבלוה בימי אחשורוש. דכתיב (אסתר ט: כז) "קיימו וקבלו היהודים", קיימו מה שקיבלו כבר. אמר חזקיה: מאי דכתיב (תהלים עו: ט) "משמים השמעת דין ארץ יראה ושקטה", אם יראה למה שקטה, ואם שקטה למה יראה? אלא: בתחילה - יראה, ולבסוף - שקטה. ולמה יראה - כדריש לקיש, דאמר ריש לקיש: מאי דכתיב (בראשית א: לא) "ויהי ערב ויהי בקר יום הששי", ה"א יתירה למה לי? - מלמד שהתנה הקדוש ברוך הוא עם מעשה בראשית, ואמר להם: אם ישראל מקבלים התורה - אתם מתקיימין, ואם לאו - אני מחזיר אתכם לתוהו ובוהו.

And they stood under the mount (Exodus 19:17): R. Abdimi b. Hama b. Hasa said: This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, overturned the mountain upon them like an [inverted] cask, and said to them, 'If ye accept the Torah, 'tis well; if not, there shall be your burial.' R. Aha b. Jacob observed: This furnishes a strong protest against the Torah. Said Rava, Yet even so, they re-accepted it in the days of Ahasuerus, for it is written, [*the Jews confirmed, and took upon them [etc.]*] (Esther 9:27): [i.e.,] they confirmed what they had accepted long before. Hezekiah said: What is meant by, *Thou didst cause sentence to be heard from Heaven; The earth feared, and was tranquil* (Psalm 76:9): if it feared, why was it tranquil, and if it was tranquil, why did it fear? But at first it feared, yet subsequently it was tranquil, And why did it fear? — Even in accordance with Resh Lakish. For Resh Lakish said: Why is it written, *And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day* (Genesis 1:31); What is the purpose of the additional 'the'? This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, stipulated with the Works of Creation and said thereto. 'If Israel accepts the Torah, ye shall exist; but if not, I will turn you back into emptiness and formlessness.'

Biblical Verses

וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת כָּל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וְהִנֵּה טוֹב מְאֹד וַיְהִי עֶרֶב וַיְהִי בֹקֶר יוֹם הַשְּׁשִׁי:

God saw all that he had done and behold it was very good. It was even and it was morning the sixth day.

Genesis 1:31

וַיּוֹצֵא מֹשֶׁה אֶת הָעָם לִקְרַאת הָאֱלֹהִים מִן הַמַּחֲנֶה וַיִּתְיַצְבוּ בְּתַחְתֵּית הָהָר:

Moses brought the people out from the camp to greet God, and they stood beneath the mountain.

Exodus 19:17

קִיְּמוּ וְקִבְּלוּ הַיְּהוּדִים עַלְיֵהֶם וְעַל זַרְעָם וְעַל כָּל הַנְּלוּיִם עַלְיֵהֶם וְלֹא יַעֲבוּר לְהִיּוֹת עֲשִׂים אֶת שְׁנֵי הַיָּמִים הָאֵלֶּה כְּכַתְּבָם וְכִזְמָנָם בְּכָל שָׁנָה וְשָׁנָה:

The Jews upheld and took upon themselves and their descendents and upon all joined to them, so as it should not fail, that they would keep these two days according to the writing thereof, and according to the appointed time thereof, every year.

Esther 9:27

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משמרים השמעת דין ארץ יראה וְשָׁקְטָה:

From the heavens the law was heard, the earth feared and was silent.

Psalm 76:9

Vocabulary

Hebrew	English
מודעה	A moda'ah is a warning which in halakhic terms (Jewish law) is issued by a person who feels they have been coerced to sign a contract.
אורייתא	Oraita is the Aramaic word which means Torah.

Personalities

Rav Abdimi – probably 3rd or 4th Century Babylonian Amora.

Rav Aha – around 300 CE, Babylonian Amora and contemporary of Abbaye and Rava.

Rava – died mid 4th century. Babylonian Amora lived in Mahoza. His name is short for R. Abba b. Joseph b. Hama. Often paired in the texts with Abbaye.

Hezekiah – it is slightly unclear who this sage is, possibly a Palestinian Amora of the 4th Century (who moved to Babylonia) and was a student of Abbaye. More likely that he is a Babylonian Amora who was Abbaye's student.

Resh Lakish – 3rd Century Palestinian Amora – Shimon ben Lakish.

About Tractate Shabbat

Tractate Shabbat is the first tractate of the order 'Mo'ed' (seasons). As its name implies, the tractate deals with the laws and regulations of the Sabbath. It contains both legal discussions and considerable 'aggadah' (lore).

Give and Take of the Talmud

Text	Translation	Notes
(שמות יט:יז) "ויתיצבו בתחתית ההר",	<i>And they stood under the mount</i> (Exodus 19:17):	This verse opens this part of the Talmudic discussion which is really a midrash within the text of the Talmud. We already met, in the last text, how the meaning of תחתית is ambiguous (meaning under/beneath, at the foot of..).
אמר רב אבדימי בר חמא בר חסא: מלמד שכפה הקדוש ברוך הוא עליהם את ההר כגיגית, ואמר להם: אם אתם מקבלים התורה - מוטב, ואם לאו - שם תהא קבורתכם.	R. Abdimi b. Hama b. Hasa said: This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, overturned the mountain upon them like an [inverted] cask, and said to them, 'If ye accept the Torah, 'tis well; if not, there shall be your burial.'	In a radical move, R. Abdimi interprets the ambiguity of the verse by suggesting that the mountain was lifted and held over Israel, not to protect them, but in order to threaten them with destruction. Acceptance is good, non-acceptance is death.
אמר רב אחא בר יעקב: מכאן מודעה רבה לאורייתא.	R. Aha b. Jacob observed: This furnishes a strong protest against the Torah.	In protest against R. Abdimi's suggestion, R. Aha brings a legal argument against the covenant. The 'strong protest' is akin to signing a contract under duress – it cannot have legal validity. Equally, based on R. Abdimi's interpretation, the covenant at Sinai now appears to be coerced.
אמר רבא: אף על פי	Said Rava, Yet even so,	Rava now offers a partial resolution to R. Ra.

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כּוּ, הַדּוֹר קָבְלוּ בְיָמַי
אֲחֻשְׁרוּשׁ. דְּכַתִּיב
(אֶסְתֵּר ט: כֹּז) "קִיְמוּ
וּקְבְלוּ הַיְהוּדִים",
קִיְמוּ מֵה שֶׁקִּבְלוּ
כִּבְר.

they re-accepted it in the days of Ahasuerus, for it is written, [*the Jews*] confirmed, and took upon them [etc.] (Esther 9:27): [i.e.,] they confirmed what they had accepted long before.

Abdimi's interpretation. The covenant was accepted willingly in the time of Esther. There is a play on the words of the verse from Esther at this point. Instead of reading the verse from Esther as we might – i.e. the Jews confirmed and accepted the celebration of Purim – the meaning of the 'ו' (letter vav) is reinterpreted from meaning 'and' to 'that which'. In other words, the Jews were upholding voluntarily 'that which' they accepted [at Mount Sinai] by force. Purim has a sort of synecdochal quality (the part represents the whole). The institution of Purim was established by the people, not by the command of God, and therefore was 'voluntary'. Purim, in this case therefore, represents the whole of the Torah and the covenant.

אָמַר חֲזָקִיָּה: מֵאִי
דְּכַתִּיב (תְּהִלִּים עו: ט)
"מִשְׁמַיִם הִשְׁמַעַת דִּין
אֶרֶץ יִרְאָה וּשְׁקֵטָה"
אִם יִרְאָה לְמָה שֶׁקֵּטָה,
וְאִם שְׁקֵטָה לְמָה
יִרְאָה? אֵלֵּא: בְּתַחֲלִילָה
- יִרְאָה, וּלְבִסּוּף -
שְׁקֵטָה.

Hezekiah said: What is meant by, *Thou didst cause sentence to be heard from Heaven; The earth feared, and was tranquil* (Psalm 76:9): if it feared, why was it tranquil, and if it was tranquil, why did it fear? But at first it feared, yet subsequently it was tranquil,

We now come to the second part of the text – the interpretation of the verse from Psalms (76:9). We met this verse in the text 1 of the course – where it already referred to the giving of Torah at Mount Sinai. Hezekiah asks why there appears to be an internal problem with the verse – which seems to imply that the earth, in response to the giving of the Torah, was both fearful and quiet. Surely it could not be both? In answer, the interpretation effectively follows a similar pattern to Raba's interpretation of the Esther verse above. Instead of reading the 'ו' (letter vav) as a simple conjunctive 'and', it is now understood to imply the lapse of time. The earth feared 'and afterwards' it was tranquil.

וּלְמָה יִרְאָה - כְּדַרְיָשׁ
לְקִישׁ, דְּאָמַר רִישׁ
לְקִישׁ: מֵאִי דְּכַתִּיב
(בְּרֵאשִׁית א: לא) "וַיְהִי
עֶרֶב וַיְהִי בֹקֶר יוֹם
הַשְּׁשִׁי", הִ"א יִתְּרָה
לְמָה לִּי? - מִלְּמַד
שֶׁהִתְנָה הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ
הוּא עִם מַעֲשֵׂה
בְּרֵאשִׁית, וְאָמַר לֵהֶם:
אִם יִשְׂרָאֵל מְקַבְּלִים
הַתּוֹרָה - אַתֶּם
מִתְקַיְּמִין, וְאִם לֹא -
אֲנִי מַחְזִיר אֶתְכֶם
לְתוֹהוּ וּבִוְהוּ.

And why did it fear? — Even in accordance with Resh Lakish. For Resh Lakish said: Why is it written, *And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day* (Genesis 1:31); What is the purpose of the additional 'the'? This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, stipulated with the Works of Creation and said thereto. 'If Israel accepts the Torah, ye shall exist; but if not, I will turn you back into emptiness and formlessness.'

The third part of our text. Whereas Raba's interpretation of the verse from Esther thrust us into the future – Israel was forced to accept the covenant, they later accepted voluntarily. In Resh Lakish's interpretation of the verse from Psalms we are taken us back to Genesis. Unlike other days of creation, the sixth day is definite. That is to say, for the other days we read 'second day' but on day six the Torah reads: 'THE sixth day'. Resh Lakish argues that the definite article refers to the sixth day of Sivan (Shavuot). From the moment the earth was created and human beings first put on earth, the earth had been fearful because God had told them that their existence was dependent on the acceptance of the Torah by Israel on THE sixth day. The earth feared 'and after the acceptance of the covenant at Mount Sinai' it was tranquil. Note also the threat by God echoes the threat to the people of Israel at the beginning of the midrash, thus taking us full circle. Not only Israel was threatened with burial, but all of the world.

Brief Discussion of Text 3

The very radical idea of this text from the Talmud is well known. In effect we hear that Israel was forced to accept the covenant. This stands in contradiction to everything we learn about the willing acceptance of the people of Israel to accept the Torah (compare for example Exodus 24:7 – 'we will do and we will obey'). Let's look at two other aspects, because we will return to this well known theme in later material.

The text of the Babylonian Talmud does not occur anywhere other than in the Babylonian Talmud. The idea of the mountain being lifted up over the Israelites is attested to in other material (like the midrash from the Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael which we read in text 2), however there it is a protective mountain, which God has lifted over the Israelites who are fearful of the revelation and voluntarily huddle beneath the mountain. Now the sequence is extended. God's revelation frightens the people, the mountain is lifted over them and instead of protecting them the mountain doubles the threatening nature of the revelation. Not only is Israel threatened with extinction but so is the whole world. The coercion of identity and covenant is of global significance.

There are various interpretations of this idea of identity. On the one hand, there are those who read the text in a plain sense – the covenant and formation of the Jewish people was coerced according to this text and that is problematic. This realisation should stand alongside the numerous texts which describe the voluntary entry into the covenant. Others argue that the coercion is essential because the Talmud is describing the inescapable Jewish identity that we are born with and according to which we should live our lives. Yet others argue that the coercion described reflects the importance of the Jewish people in the world – without their acceptance Jews would not exist (and potentially neither would the world). Finally, others suggest that the coercion reflects a rejection of modern temptations of knowledge and being – by being coerced there was no possibility of a little experimentation in being Jewish to decide if we liked it, rather the covenant was coerced and from within this status we use our free will in the world.

Questions

Something about the give and take of the Talmud:

1. Notice how the Talmud first takes the people forward to their exile and redemption from Haman's decree and then returns to the very beginning of the world. Do you have any thoughts or comments about the use of the 'v' (letter vav) to denote such long passages of time?

Thinking about the themes in the Talmud:

2. What do you think is the significance of the voluntary acceptance occurring in the Esther story set in Persia?
3. How do you understand the continued existence of the world being contingent on the acceptance of the Torah by Israel at Mount Sinai?

Thinking about our lives as Jews:

4. We must remember that the coercion expressed in this text is only a part of the puzzle – many other texts reflect the voluntary acceptance of the covenant. However, how do you feel your own sense of Jewish identity relates to this text?

A Final Idea

There is a distinct contrast between Sinai and Purim. The moment of revelation at Sinai, when the covenant is made, is one in which God's presence is so strongly felt the Israelites are terrified. The story of Purim dramatically unfolds without a mention of God at all, yet this is the model for the reacceptance of the covenant. Perhaps that tells us something about Jewish belonging and identity in a time without revelation.

Text 4: Genesis Rabbah 96 - Autonomy

ד"א ויקרא יעקב אל בניו זהו שאמי הכת' אקרא לאלהים עליון לאל גמר עלי (תהלים נז ג) אמר ר' יהושע בן לוי שלשה דברים גזרו בית דין שלמטון, והסכים הקדוש ברוך הוא מלמעלן עימהם, ואילו הן אחד בימי עזרא, בשעה שעלו מבבל ביקש הקדוש ברוך הוא להתיר להן את המעשרות, מה עשו, הלכו וגזרו על עצמן שהן מעשרין, שכן הוא א' את ראשית עריסותינו ותרומי ופרי כל עץ ותירוש ויצהר וגוי (נחמיה י לח), מה עשו, כתבו בספר וחתמו אותו ונתנו אותו בהיכל, למחר נכנסו ומצאו אתו חתום, ומנין שהסכים הקדוש ברוך הוא עימהן, ובכל זאת אנחנו כרתים אמנה וכתבים על החתום (נחמיה י א), ואחד בימי מרדכי ואסתר, שני קיימו וקבלו היהודים (אסתר ט כז), ומנין שהסכים הקדוש ברוך הוא עמהן, וקיבלו אין כת', אלא וקבל היהודים, מיכן שהסכים הקדוש ברוך הוא עמהן, ואחד בימי יהושע, בשעה שנכנסו ישראל לארץ, אמי להן יהושע והיתה העיר חרם (יהושע ו יז), ואין אתה מוצא שאמי לו הקדוש ברוך הוא אלא מעצמו עשאו, ומנין שהסכים הקדוש ברוך הוא שני חטא ישראל וגם עברו את בריתי וגוי (יהושע ז יא), מיכן שהסכים הקדוש ברוך הוא עימהן הוי אקרא לאלהים עליון, [ד"א אקרא לאלהים עליון] מדבר ביעקב, בשעה שניכנסו בניו לברכה התחיל מחלק להן פרוקופאות, ומנין שהסכים הקדוש ברוך הוא עמו, שכן את מוצא בברכה שביד יעקב אבינו את השבטים כך בירכן משה, תדע לך שהוא כן, את מוצא ממה שהסכים הקדוש ברוך הוא עמו על כל ברכה וברכה, אימתי בשעה שהיה מסתלק מן העולם הוי ויקרא יעקב אל בניו.

Another interpretation of, "AND JACOB CALLED UNTO HIS SONS" (Genesis 49:1). Scripture says, "I will cry to God Most High; to God who completes it for me" (Psalm 57:3).

R. Joshua b. Levi said: Three things did the earthly court decree, and the Holy One, who is blessed, approved their decrees from above. And these are they: One in the days of Ezra. When they returned from Babylon the Holy One, who is blessed, wished to free them [the Israelites] of tithes. What did they [the Israelites] do? They went and decreed that they should tithe, for so it says, "And that we should bring the first of our dough, and our heave-offerings, and the fruit of all manner of trees, the wine and the oil, etc." (Nehemiah 10:38). What did they do? They recorded it in a document, sealed it, and deposited it in the Temple, and on the morrow they entered and found it sealed. And how do we know that God approved their action? "And yet for all this we make a sure covenant and subscribe what is [already] sealed" (Nehemiah 10:1).

Another was in the days of Mordecai and Esther, as it says, "The Jews ordained, and took upon them, etc." (Esther 9:27). And how do we know that God approved their action? Because "The Jews... took upon them" is written not in the plural but in the singular.

The third was in the days of Joshua. When Israel entered the Land Joshua said to them, "And the city shall be devoted" (Joshua 6:17). And you do not find that God had bidden him this, but he acted of his own accord. And how do we know that God agreed with him? Because it says, "Israel has sinned; they have transgressed My covenant... they have even taken of the devoted thing" (Joshua 7:11), from which we learn that God agreed with them. This corroborates the text, "I will cry unto God Most High." (Psalm 57:3).

Another interpretation: 'I will cry unto God Most High' refers to Jacob. When his sons entered for their blessings, he began to confer distinctions upon them. And how do we know that God approved his action? Because you find that Moses blessed them with the same blessing which Jacob conferred upon the tribal ancestors. This proof follows from the fact that God approved each single blessing. When was this? When he was departing from the world. Hence "AND JACOB CALLED UNTO HIS SONS" (Genesis 49:1).

Biblical Verses

וַיִּקְרָא יַעֲקֹב אֶל בְּנָיו וַיֹּאמֶר הֲאִסְפוּ וְאֶגִּידָה לָכֶם אֵת אֲשֶׁר יִקְרָא אֲתֶכֶם בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים:

Jacob called to his sons and said, "Gather round and I will tell you what is to befall you in days to come."

Genesis 49:1

וְהָיְתָה הָעִיר חָרָם הִיא וְכָל אֲשֶׁר בָּהּ לַיהוָה רַק רַחֵם הַזֹּנֶה תַחֲיֶיהָ הִיא וְכָל אֲשֶׁר אִתָּהּ בְּבַיִת כִּי תִחַבְּאֶתָּה אֵת הַמְּלָאכִים אֲשֶׁר שָׁלַחְנוּ:

The city and everything in it are to be proscribed for the Eternal One; only Rahab the harlot is to be spared, and all who are with her in the house, because she hid the messengers we sent.

Joshua 6:17

חָטָא יִשְׂרָאֵל וְגַם עָבְרוּ אֵת בְּרִיתִי אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִי אוֹתָם וְגַם לָקְחוּ מִן הַחֶרֶם וְגַם גָּנְבוּ וְגַם כָּחֲשׂוּ וְגַם שָׁמוּ בְכֻלֵיהֶם:

Israel has sinned! They have broken the covenant by which I bound them. They have taken of the proscribed and put it in their vessels; they have stolen; they have broken faith!

Joshua 7:11

אֶקְרָא לֵאלֹהִים עֲלִיוֹן לְאֵל גָּמֵר עָלַי :

I will call to God most high, to God who completes it for me.

Psalms 57:3

קִיְמוּ וּקְבִלוּ וּקְבְּלוּ הַיְהוּדִים עֲלֵיהֶם וְעַל זֶרְעָם וְעַל כָּל הַנְּלוּיִם עֲלֵיהֶם וְלֹא יַעֲבוֹר לְהִיּוֹת עֲשִׂים אֵת שְׁנֵי הַיָּמִים הָאֵלֶּה כְּכַתְּבָם וְכַזְּמָנָם בְּכָל שָׁנָה וְשָׁנָה:

The Jews upheld and accepted upon themselves and their descendents, and all who might join them, to observe these two days in the manner prescribed and at the proper time each year.

Esther 9:27

וּבְכָל זֹאת אֲנַחְנוּ כֹּתְבִים וְכַתְּבִים וְעַל הַחֲתוּם שָׂרִינוּ לְוִיָּנוּ כְּהִנְנוּ:

In view of all this, we make this pledge and put it in writing; and on the sealed copy [are subscribed] our officials, our Levites, and our priests.

Nehemiah 10:1

וְאֵת רֵאשִׁית עֲרִיסַתֵּינוּ וְתֵירוֹמַתֵּינוּ וּפְרִי כָּל עֵץ תִּירוֹשׁ וְיִצְהָר נְבִיא לַכְּהֲנִים אֶל לְשָׁכוֹת בַּיִת אֱלֹהֵינוּ וּמַעֲשֵׂר אֲדָמַתֵּנוּ לְלוּיִם וְהֵם הַלוּיִם הַמְּעַשְׂרִים בְּכָל עֲרֵי עִבְדֹתֵנוּ:

We will bring to the storerooms of the House of God the first part of our dough, and our gifts [of grain], and of the fruit of every tree, wine and oil for the priests, and the tithes of our land for the Levites – the Levites who collect the tithe in all our towns subject to royal service.

Nehemiah 10:38

Revelation, Identity and Covenant

Personalities

Rabbi Joshua b. Levi – 3rd Century Amora, in the land of Israel.

About Genesis Rabbah

Genesis Rabbah is one of the oldest Palestinian Amoraic collections of midrashim. It may date back to the 4th-5th Century of the common era. Genesis Rabbah is exegetical in nature, in that interpretations are made for words and sentences in the order they come in the book of Genesis.

Mechanics of the Midrash

Text	Translation	Notes
<p>ד"א ויקרא יעקב אל בניו זהו שאמ' הכתי' אקרא לאלהים עליון לאל גמר עלי (תהלים נז ג)</p> <p>אמר ר' יהושע בן לוי שלשה דברים גזרו בית דין שלמטו, והסכים הקדוש ברוך הוא מלמעלן עימהם, ואילו הן אחד בימי עזרא, בשעה שעלו מבבל ביקש הקדוש ברוך הוא להתיר להן את המעשרות, מה עשו, הלכו וגזרו על עצמן שהן מעשרין, שכן הוא א' את ראשית עריסותינו ותרומי ופרי כל עץ ותירוש ויצהר וגוי (נחמיה י לח), מה עשו, כתבו בספר וחתמו אתו ונתנו אותו בהיכל, למחר נכנסו ומצאו אתו חתום, ומנין שהסכים הקדוש ברוך הוא עימהו, ובכל זאת אנחנו כרתים אמנה וכתבים על החתום (נחמיה י א),</p> <p>ואחד בימי מרדכי ואסתר, שני קיימו וקבלו היהודים (אסתר ט כז), ומניין שהסכים הקדוש ברוך הוא עמהו, וקיבלו אין כתי', אלא וקבל היהודים, מיכן</p>	<p>Another interpretation of, "AND JACOB CALLED UNTO HIS SONS" (Genesis 49:1). Scripture says, "I will cry to God Most High; to God who completes it for me" (Psalm 57:3).</p> <p>R. Joshua b. Levi said: Three things did the earthly court decree, and the Holy One, who is blessed, approved their decrees from above. And these are they: One in the days of Ezra. When they returned from Babylon the Holy One, who is blessed, wished to free them [the Israelites] of tithes. What did they [the Israelites] do? They went and decreed that they should tithe, for so it says, "And that we should bring the first of our dough, and our heave-offerings, and the fruit of all manner of trees, the wine and the oil, etc." (Nehemiah 10:38). What did they do? They recorded it in a document, sealed it, and deposited it in the Temple, and on the morrow they entered and found it sealed. And how do we know that God approved their action? "And yet for all this we make a sure covenant and subscribe what is [already] sealed" (Nehemiah 10:1).</p> <p>Another was in the days of Mordecai and Esther, as it says, "The Jews ordained, and took upon them, etc." (Esther 9:27). And how do we know that God approved their action? Because "The Jews... took upon</p>	<p>The midrash is based on Genesis 49:1, but before we get to the verse, we are going to visit a series of interpretations based on Psalm 57:3.</p> <p>If we read Psalm 57:3 as <i>I called to God with an 'earthly court decree' and God completed the decree with approval from 'above'</i>, then we will understand how R. Joshua b. Levi is going to interpret the verse. The first novel institution, not commanded by God, brought by R. Joshua b. Levi is in the days of Ezra. The people decide that they should continue to offer tithes and this is accepted by God – the proof text implies that the 'sealed' copy is already sealed by God.</p> <p>The second proof of God approving of what the people decide for themselves is based on how the text is written in the book of Esther, as opposed to how it is vocalised (what is known as k'ri and k'tiv). The</p>

Revelation, Identity and Covenant

שהסכים הקדוש ברוך
הוא עמהן,

them" is written not in the plural but
in the singular.

text of the verb 'accepted' is
written in the singular form (he
accepted) but read in the plural
form (they accepted). The
midrash reads the verse not as
vocalised, but as written. In
other words, the Jews took
upon themselves that which He
(God) accepted.

ואחד בימי יהושע,
בשעה שנכנסו ישראל
לארץ, אמ' להן יהושע
והיתה העיר חרם
(יהושע ו יז), ואין
אתה מוצא שאמ' לו
הקדוש ברוך הוא
אלא מעצמו עשאו,
ומנין שהסכים
הקדוש ברוך הוא שני
חטא ישראל וגם עברו
את בריתי וגוי (יהושע
ז יא), מיכן שהסכים
הקדוש ברוך הוא
עימהן הוי אקרא
לאלהים עליון,

The third was in the days of Joshua.
When Israel entered the Land
Joshua said to them, "And the city
shall be proscribed" (Joshua 6:17).
And you do not find that God had
bidden him this, but he acted of his
own accord. And how do we know
that God agreed with him? Because
it says, "Israel has sinned; they have
transgressed My covenant... they
have even taken of the devoted
thing" (Joshua 7:11), from which we
learn that God agreed with them.
This corroborates the text, "I will cry
unto God Most High." (Psalm 57:3).

The third example is based on a
decree which Joshua decides
about the city of Jericho – that
it shall be proscribed. The proof
that God agrees with Joshua's
decree is that God considers the
people to have transgressed
'God's' own commandment
(even though the text appears
to imply that it wasn't God's
idea) when they take the
valuables from Jericho and put
them in the House of the
Eternal One (see Joshua 6:22).

All of these three examples
demonstrate that on these
occasions the people (or an
individual) created a law that
God did not command and
God agreed to the law –
thereby supporting the
interpretation of the verse from
Psalms.

[ד"א אקרא לאלהים
עליון] מדבר ביעקב,
בשעה שניכנסו בניו
לברכה התחיל מחלק
להן פרוקופאות, ומנין
שהסכים הקדוש ברוך
הוא עמו, שכן את
מוצא בברכה שבירך
יעקב אבינו את
השבטים כך בירכן
משה, תדע לך שהוא
כן, את מוצא ממה
שהסכים הקדוש ברוך
הוא עמו על כל ברכה
וברכה, אימתי בשעה
שהיה מסתלק מן
העולם הוי ויקרא
יעקב אל בניו

Another interpretation: 'I will cry
unto God Most High' refers to Jacob.
When his sons entered for their
blessings, he began to confer
distinctions upon them. And how do
we know that God approved his
action? Because you find that Moses
blessed them with the same blessing
which Jacob conferred upon the
tribal ancestors. This proof follows
from the fact that God approved
each single blessing. When was this?
When he was departing from the
world. Hence "AND JACOB CALLED
UNTO HIS SONS" (Genesis 49:1).

An alternative version of the
interpretation of the verse from
Psalms brings us back to Jacob.
Jacob confers a blessing on his
children which could have
lacked God's approval.
However, the fact that Moses
blesses the tribes (the
descendants of Jacob's sons) in
the same style of blessing proves
that God's approved of the first
lot of blessings. Therefore, the
Psalm is now interwoven into
the verse from Genesis – the
verb קרא (to call) is found in
both verses.

Brief Discussion of Text 4

There are a great many layers to this midrash, however we will stick to a couple of points of note. If we cast our minds back to Text 3 (B. Shabbat 88a) we already found a similar example of the use of the verse from Esther, in which the acceptance of the festival of Purim was evidence of the people's acceptance of the whole of the covenant. Here, in Genesis Rabbah, the ideas are slightly different – which sheds light on the whole midrash. It is not the whole covenant that is being accepted by the people, but God's approval of the creation of a commandment to celebrate Purim.

In other words, the midrash has quite a limited understanding of the significance of the verse from Esther – it is just evidence that the people autonomously create the commandment for the festival of Purim and God approves of it. Whereas, in the Babylonian Talmud, the significance of the verse from Esther is much bigger – no longer is it about God's approval for the creation of the festival of Purim, it is now an indication of the people's acceptance of the whole of the covenant and mitzvot.

The midrash has a powerful suggestion at its core – the people are able to create their own commandments about which God approves. There is a hint towards the people's autonomy and a reversal of the usual direction of revelation. We normally expect God to decree above and the people to accept below, in the midrash it is the reverse.

Each of the first three examples comes after the Torah and gradually moves closer to Deuteronomy: the leadership of Ezra; the Jews in Persia; the time of Joshua during the conquest of the land of Israel. The final turn of the midrash crosses from pre-Sinai to post-Sinai with Jacob's blessing.

Questions**Something about the mechanics of the Midrash:**

- 1) Do you think there is any significance to the chronology and location of each of the moments described in the midrash?

Thinking about the themes in the Midrash:

- 2) To what extent do you think the examples offered in the midrash are solitary events, or is it legitimate to view them as indicators of a wider autonomous potential?
- 3) Thinking back to the comparison between Genesis Rabbah and B. Shabbat 88a: does the Babylonian Talmud extend the meaning from the midrash regarding the actions of the Israelites and their relationship to God, or does the Babylonian Talmud alter the meaning completely?

Thinking about our lives as Jews:

- 4) What do you think, if any, are the implications of the midrash and the Babylonian Talmud for our understanding of what it means to be Jew in the 21st Century – both autonomous and choosing to be Jewish?

A Final Idea

The further away from the Torah we move in the Tanakh, revelation of God changes – becoming more distant and even altogether absent. In the book of Esther God is not mentioned and the narrative around Ezra is characterised by the people's return to the revealed text as the source of understanding God's presence in the world. Today we live in an age in which the revelation of God is not experienced as described in the Bible and the divine origin of the text is no longer accepted. How do these ideas tie in to the message of the midrash and of the Babylonian Talmud in text 4?

The Talmudic text contains a strong claim for some kind of powerful autonomy: the date for Shavuot (on 6th Sivan) is a matter of dispute (see Encyclopedia Judaica download). Yet the rabbinic literature claims not only that it is the 6th Sivan, but also that it is the date of the giving of the Torah (itself not mentioned in the Torah). Therefore, the development from the midrash in Genesis Rabbah to the Babylonian Talmud (with the use of the same verse from Esther) seems to make an astonishing claim for the autonomy for the Jewish community and its development of ritual and mitzvot. What do you think?

Text 5: Ramban Commentary on B. Shabbat 88a – Israel and Diaspora

To follow this text you may need to refer back to text 3 – from the Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 88a. It is a complex text which might need to be read and re-read.

והא דאמרין בענין אגדה הא מודעא רבא לאורייתא ומתרץ כבר קבלוה בימי אחשורוש. קשה לי וכי מה קבלה זו עושה מסופו של עולם לתחלתו, אם קודם אחשורוש לא היו מצווים למה נענשו ואם נאמר מפני שעברו על גזירת מלכם א"כ בטלת מודעא זו, ועוד למה הצריכם לקבלה וברית,

וני"ל לומר דמתחלה אע"פ שהיה להם מודעא מ"מ לא נתן להם הארץ אלא כדי שיקיימו התורה כמו שמפורש בתורה בכמה פרשיות, וכתוב (תהלים ק"ה) "ויתן להם ארצות גוים ועמל לאומים ירשו בעבור ישמרו חוקיו ותורותיו ינצורו", והם עצמן מתחלה לא עכבו בדבר כלל ולא אמרו במודעא כלום אלא ברצון נפשם מעצמם אמרו כל אשר דבר ה' נעשה ונשמע,

לפיכך כשעברו על התורה עמד והגלם מן הארץ, משגלו מסרו מודעא על הדבר מדכתיב (יחזקאל כ') והעולה על רוחכם היה לא תהיה אשר אתם אומרים נהיה כגוים וכמשפחות האדמה לשרת עץ ואבן, וכדאמרין באגדה (סנהדרין ק"ה א') רבינו יחזקאל עבד שמכרו רבו כלום יש לו עליו וכו', לפיכך כשבאו לארץ בביאה שניה בימי עזרא עמדו מעצמם וקבלוה ברצון שלא יטענו עוד שום תרעומות, והיינו בימי אחשורוש שהוציאם ממות לחיים והיה זה חביב עליהם מגאולה של מצרים.

We say concerning the subject of the agadah that a "strong protest against the Torah" that it [the protest] is resolved because they already accepted it in the days of Ahasuerus. This is difficult for me, that this acceptance was done from the end of the world to its beginning. If prior to Ahasuerus they were not commanded why were they punished? If one says because they transgressed the rule of their king, if so it is an annulment of the warning. Moreover, why was acceptance and the covenant required?

It seems to me to say that from the start, even though they had the warning, in any event God only gave the land in order to uphold the Torah as it is explained in the Torah in many sections. It is written (Psalm 105:44-45) "He gave them the lands of the nations: and they inherited the labour of the people; that they might observe his statutes, and keep his laws." And they themselves from the start did not delay in this matter and they did not say any warning, rather with complete willingness they said "All that the Eternal One has said we will do and we will obey" (Exodus 24:7).

Therefore, when they transgressed the Torah, God expelled them from the land. Since they were expelled they passed warning concerning the matter as it is written, "that which comes into your mind shall never come to pass, that you should say we shall be as the nations and families of the earth to serve wood and stone" (Ezekiel 20:32). And as it said in the agadah (B. Sanhedrin 105a) "If a master sells his slave, does he have any hold over him?". Therefore, when they came to the land for the second time in the days of Ezra they stood for themselves and willingly accepted that they would not claim again this objection. This refers to the days of Ahasuerus, God brought them from death to life and this was more beloved to them than the redemption from Egypt.

Revelation, Identity and Covenant

Who was Ramban?

(taken from <http://myjewishlearning.com> by Rabbi Dr Louis Jacobs)

Nahmanides was a Spanish Talmudist, Kabbalist, and biblical exegete (1194-1270), known, after the initial letters of his name, as Ramban (Rabbi Moshe ben Nahman). Nahmanides was born in Gerona, Spain, where he lived for most of his life. An outstanding Talmudist, his work in this field still enjoys the highest esteem among students of the Talmud. As a halakhic authority, he exercised a great influence on the Codes of Jewish law, especially through the Responsa of his most distinguished disciple, Solomon Ibn Adret. Nahmanides was also the leading figure in the Gerona circle of Kabbalists. Indeed, it was through his renown as a Talmudist that respectability was won for the Spanish Kabbalah; though he was very circumspect in sharing his Kabbalistic insights, referring to them, for instance, in his Commentary to the Pentateuch, only by hint.

Step by step in the commentary

Text	Translation	Notes
והא דאמרין בענין אגדה הא מודעא רבא לאורייתא ומתרץ כבר קבלוה בימי אחשורוש.	We say concerning the subject of the agadah that a "strong protest against the Torah" that it [the protest] is resolved because they already accepted it in the days of Ahasuerus.	Ramban begins by summarising the first part of our Talmudic text which he emphasises is aggadah (not law) – in which the upturned mountain and threat of death gives a claim that the covenant was coerced. This is partially resolved by the following point in the Talmud – the people willingly accepted the covenant in the symbol of observance of Purim.
קשה לי וכי מה קבלה זו עושה מסופו של עולם לתחלתו, אם קודם אחשורוש לא היו מצווים למה נענשו	This is difficult for me, that this acceptance was done from the end of the world to its beginning. If prior to Ahasuerus they were not commanded why were they punished?	Ramban now makes the logical point that what happened between Sinai and Purim? How could the later impact on the earlier? Why were the people punished and sent into exile from the land of Israel if the 'protest against the Torah' held weight?
ואם נאמר מפני שעברו על גזירת מלכם א"כ בטלת מודעא זו, ועוד למה הצריכם לקבלה וברית,	If one says because they transgressed the rule of their king, if so it is an annulment of the warning. Moreover, why was acceptance and the covenant required?	He clarifies – if this is because of God's law then the 'protest' has no significance otherwise it would still mean the people should not have been punished. If they were punished anyway, why was any acceptance required in the days of Ahasuerus. That is to say, if God's rule was in place then claim or no claim, acceptance or not, the people were obligated.
וני"ל לומר דמתחלה אע"פ שהיה להם מודעא מ"מ לא נתן להם הארץ אלא כדי שיקיימו התורה כמו שמפורש בתורה בכמה פרשיות,	It seems to me to say that from the start, even though they had the warning, in any event God <u>only</u> gave the land in order to uphold the Torah as it is explained in the Torah in many sections.	Ramban now offers his theory to explain both the punishment and the need for acceptance: the protest was legitimate (the Israelites could claim they were coerced to accept the covenant) however that was in the background because the reason the people were punished was because they were living in the land of Israel and living in the

Revelation, Identity and Covenant

וכתיב (תהלים ק"ה) "ויתן להם ארצות גוים ועמל לאומים ירשו בעבור ישמרו חוקיו ותורותיו ינצורו",

והם עצמן מתחלה לא עכבו בדבר כלל ולא אמרו במודעה כלום אלא ברצון נפשם מעצמם אמרו כל אשר דבר ה' נעשה ונשמע,

לפיכך כשעברו על התורה עמד והגלם מן הארץ,

משגלו מודעה על הדבר מדכתיב (יחזקאל כ') והעולה על רוחכם היה לא תהיה אשר אתם אומרים נהיה כגוים וכמשפחות האדמה לשרת עץ ואבן,

וכדאמרין באגדה (סנהדרין ק"ה א') רבינו יחזקאל עבד שמכרו רבו כלום יש לו עליו וכו',

לפיכך כשבאו לארץ בביאה שניה בימי עזרא עמדו מעצמם וקבלו ברצון שלא יטענו עוד שום תרעומות, והיינו בימי אחשורוש שהוציאים ממות לחיים והיה זה חביב עליהם מגאולה של מצרים.

It is written (Psalm 105:44-45) "He gave them the lands of the nations: and they inherited the wealth of the people; that they might observe his statutes, and keep his laws."

And they themselves from the start did not delay in this matter and they did not say any warning, rather with complete willingness they said "All that the Eternal One has said we will do and we will obey" (Exodus 24:7).

Therefore, when they transgressed the Torah, God expelled them from the land.

Since they were expelled they passed warning concerning the matter as it is written, "that which comes into your mind shall never come to pass, that you should say we shall be as the nations and families of the earth to serve wood and stone" (Ezekiel 20:32).

And as it said in the agadah (B. Sanhedrin 105a) "If a master sells his slave, does he have any hold over him?".

Therefore, when they came to the land for the second time in the days of Ezra they stood for themselves and willingly accepted that they would not claim again this objection. This refers to the days of Ahasuerus, God brought them from death to life and this was more beloved to them than the redemption from Egypt.

land was contingent upon keeping the mitzvot.

Ramban offers the following proof for the land and the Torah being contingent on one another.

In response to the connection between upholding the law of Torah and living in the land of Israel the people say 'we will do and we will obey' – they accept.

It follows therefore, that the punishment of expulsion was not because the moment at Sinai was coerced but because life in Israel was contingent on obedience to Torah.

Now comes the need for acceptance which Ramban mentioned earlier. As soon as the people are not living in the land of Israel the 'protest' against coercion comes back into play. In quoting Ezekiel, Ramban suggests that God's rule carried through even in exile however in exile there is no acceptance of the law by the people, unlike when they were in the land of Israel.

This text from the Babylonian Talmud compares a slave who is sold by his master with Israel in exile. Once a slave-master sells his slave he no longer has any hold over him. However, Israel in exile is still under the rule of God.

If God's authority was still in place, but the people had not consented to the covenant a fresh voluntary acceptance was required for life outside of the land of Israel. That is the point of the reacceptance in the time of Ahasuerus was a demonstration of the covenantal relationship in exile.

Brief Discussion of Text 5

Ramban's explanation is slightly tricky to grasp. Essentially he argues that the protest against the coerced covenant was irrelevant whilst in the land of Israel, because God gave the land of Israel to the Israelites on the condition that they would uphold God's law. The people consent to this agreement, according to Ramban, when they say, "All the Eternal One has said we will do and obey." However, once they have been expelled from the land of Israel because of transgression of the law, the protest came back into effect. The people once again could claim that they were forced to accept the covenant and therefore did not need to obey the covenant in exile – even though God's rule extended beyond the land of Israel. Therefore, when they were saved in the days of Ahasuerus they reaccepted voluntarily the covenant. Purim is a synecdoche (a part representing the whole) for the whole covenant.

Thus, for Ramban the land of Israel holds a pivotal place in living a Jewish life in accordance with the covenant. Life outside the land of Israel has a different quality and is even lacking a certain spiritual essence. For further details of Ramban's view on the relationship of the mitzvot to the land of Israel see his commentary on Leviticus 18:25.

Note therefore, that for the Ramban there are two different acceptances – one acceptance by the people regarding their life in the land of Israel and another for their life living in the diaspora.

Questions

- 1) Ramban is responding to a specific issue with the logic in the Babylonian Talmud – what happens between the moment at Sinai and the reacceptance in the time of Ahasuerus? His conclusion is based on looking at what is different in the situation of the Israelites – at the time of Ahasuerus the people are in exile. Does this logic work and what are the difficulties?
- 2) Is there any validity to feeling a sense of coercion to being Jewish for Jews in the 21st Century?
- 3) Is there any difference between the status of observing Jewish life (in whatever form that takes) in the land of Israel and outside of the land of Israel?
- 4) How do we bear the burden of former acceptance of a covenant by our ancestors and how do we revisit that decision as individuals today?
- 5) How does being Jewish and Jewish identity differ between the diaspora and Israel today? Does this dichotomy mean anything to us today?
- 6) Does the model of acceptance of a covenant even work in our time?

A Final Idea

The State of Israel has recently become the place where the largest number of Jews live in the world and is, according to some, undergoing some kind of a renaissance in creativity in ideas about being Jewish today. Yet, perhaps we are also seeing a greater globalisation of Jewish life and a change in how different Jewish populations influence one another (Limmud is one example of this – something that began in the UK and has now spread globally).

Text 6: Maharal in Tiferet Yisrael chapter 32 – A Protest Against Heaven

To follow this text you may need to refer back to text 3 – from the Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 88a. It is a complex text which might need to be read and re-read. This is an extract of the full chapter.

...כי איך תהיה התורה שהיא שלמות כל המציאות על ידי שכך בחרו ישראל לקבל התורה, ואם כן שלמות העולם היה תולה בדבר אפשרי שהיה אפשר שיקבלו ואפשר שלא יקבלו, ולכך כפה עליהם ההר כגיגית שאם לא היו מקבלים התורה שם תהא קבורתם...

...וכך מוכח במדרש בפסוק ולו תהיה לאשה לא יוכל שלחה כל ימיו כשבא הקדוש ברוך הוא לתת תורה על הר סיני כפה עליהם ההר כגיגית שיקבלו תורתו, וכיון שכך הרי ישראל אנוסתו של הקדוש ברוך הוא, ואצל אנוסתו כתיב ולו תהיה לאשה לא יוכל שלחה כל ימיו ולא כן אצל מפתח. מפני שמשפט האונס כפי מה שהיה המעשה, כי המאנס היה מכריח הבתולה על האישות וכל דבר שהוא מוכרח הוא מחויב, ולכך לא יוכל שלחה כפי אשר הוא עושה בעצמו האישות ההכרחי לכך לא יסור כלל. ולכך כפה השם יתברך עליהם ההר כגיגית להיות החיבור הזה הכרחי, וכל זיווג וחבור הכרחי אין סלוק והסרה כמו שהוא אצל המאנס אישה....

...ולפיכך כפה עליהם ההר כגיגית במה שהחבור הזה הכרחי ואינו דבר שאפשר שיהיה ואפשר שלא יהיה, שאחר שקבלת התורה הוא שלמות כל העולם איך יהיה בדבר זה אפשרות כלל..

...But how could it be that the Torah, which is the completion of all existence, be dealt with in such a way that Israel could choose to accept the Torah. And if so the completion of the world was dependent on a thing that was only a possibility: that it was possible they could accept and possible that they would not accept. Therefore, He overturned the mountain upon them like an [inverted] cask so that if they did not accept the Torah, there would be their burial place...

...Proof of this is in the midrash on the verse “and she shall be his wife...he can never have the right to divorce her” (Deuteronomy 22:29). For when the Holy One blessed be He came to give the Torah on Sinai He overturned the mountain upon them like an [inverted] cask so that they would accept His Torah. Since this was so, behold Israel is the one who is forced by the Holy One who is blessed. Concerning the one who is forced (raped) it is written in Torah “and she shall be his wife...he can never have the right to divorce her”, it is not so concerning the seducer. Since the law of rape is according to that which was done, for the rapist has compelled the virgin into marriage and anything that is compelled is binding. That is why he cannot divorce her, because of that which he himself did by compelled marriage; therefore there is no release at all. Therefore, Hashem, who is blessed, overturned the mountain upon them like an [inverted] cask so that the partnership would be compelled. And there is no leave or release from any coupling or partnership that is compelled, just as the man who rapes a woman...

...Therefore, He overturned the mountain upon them like an [inverted] cask, by means of a compelled partnership and it was not a thing that it was possible it will be or will not be. For after the acceptance of the Torah the entire world was completed, how could that only be something possible?

Revelation, Identity and Covenant

Who was the Maharal?

(extracts taken from <http://myjewishlearning.com> by Rabbi Dr Louis Jacobs)

Maharal of Prague is an acronym for Morenu Harav Rabbi Laib, 'Our Teacher Rabbi Leow,' who was a Talmudist, theologian, and Rabbi of Prague (d. 1609). It is unfortunate that the Maharal is known chiefly as the creator of the golem and that his grave is one of the tourist attractions in the city, since he was an original and influential thinker who deserves better than a reputation as a vulgar miracle-worker.

In his thought Maharal was influenced by the Renaissance and the emerging new scientific picture of the universe. A prominent theme in his writings is, consequently, the role of man in the creation.

Following Rabbinic teachings on this theme, the Maharal develops the idea that God created an incomplete universe which it is the task of humans to bring to completion. This applies even to the Torah, which is incomplete and requires to be applied by the sages of Israel through their deliberations.

Maharal was a staunch defender of the Jewish people, the custodians of the Torah. Against Christian charges that Jews are all too ready to engage in controversy and are often cantankerous, Maharal suggests that this is an indication of Jewish superiority. Men of small intellectual and spiritual calibre all too readily give in when their opinions are challenged. Great men fight for their strongly held opinions which they do not readily surrender. Only abject slaves obey their masters unquestioningly. Jews are princes, aristocrats of the spirit. There is a strong mystical tinge to Maharal's thought. He was obviously influenced by the Kabbalah but formulates his thought in such a way that his theories are presented in his own style without any direct reference to Kabbalistic terminology.

Step by step in the commentary

What follows is an attempt to guide you through the text step by step.

Text	Translation	Notes
<p>...כי איך תהיה התורה שהיא שלמות כל המצויאות על ידי שכך בחרו ישראל לקבל התורה, ואם כן שלמות העולם היה תולה בדבר אפשרי שהיה אפשר שיקבלו ואפשר שלא יקבלו, ולכך כפה עליהם ההר כגיגית שאם לא היו מקבלים התורה שם תהא קבורתם...</p>	<p>...But how could it be that the Torah, which is the completion of all existence, be dealt with in such a way that Israel could choose to accept the Torah. And if so the completion of the world was dependent on a thing that was only a possibility: that it was possible they could accept and possible that they would not accept. Therefore, He overturned the mountain upon them like an [inverted] cask so that if they did not accept the Torah, there would be their burial place...</p>	<p>The Maharal seeks to explain that the solutions offered to the text in B. Shabbat 88a are unsatisfactory. In essence, he argues that had God offered Israel the opportunity to retract from the covenant it would have been to the detriment to Israel's reputation and a disaster for the world because he believes the Torah to be essential to the existence of the world. The Israelites had a choice, but the choice was acceptance or death and destruction of the entire world. This reminds us of the Maharal's view of the importance of Torah and the Jewish people to the world.</p>
<p>...וכך מוכח במדרש</p>	<p>...Proof of this is in the midrash on</p>	<p>The Maharal continues to offer an</p>

Revelation, Identity and Covenant

בפסוק ולו תהיה
לאשה לא יוכל
שלחה כל ימיו
כשבא הקדוש ברוך
הוא לתת תורה על
הר סיני כפה עליהם
ההר כגיגית שיקבלו
תורתו, וכיון שכך
הרי ישראל אנוסתו
של הקדוש ברוך
הוא, ואצל אנוסתו
כתיב ולו תהיה
לאשה לא יוכל
שלחה כל ימיו ולא
כן אצל מפתה. מפני
שמשפט האונס כפי
מה שהיה המעשה,
כי המאנס היה
מכריח הבתולה על
האישות וכל דבר
שהוא מוכרח הוא
מחויב, ולכך לא
יוכל שלחה כפי אשר
הוא עושה בעצמו
האישות ההכרחי
לכך לא יסור כלל.
ולכך כפה השם
יתברך עליהם ההר
כגיגית להיות
החיבור הזה הכרחי,
וכל זיווג וחבור
הכרחי אין סלוק
והסרה כמו שהוא
אצל המאנס
אישה: ...

...ולפיכך כפה
עליהם ההר כגיגית
במה שהחבור הזה
הכרחי ואינו דבר
שאפשר שיהיה
ואפשר שלא יהיה,
שאחר שקבלת
התורה הוא שלמות
כל העולם איך יהיה
בדבר זה אפשרות
כלל..

the verse “and she shall be his wife...he can never have the right to divorce her” (Deuteronomy 22:29). For when the Holy One blessed be He came to give the Torah on Sinai He overturned the mountain upon them like an [inverted] cask so that they would accept His Torah. Since this was so, behold Israel is the one who is forced by the Holy One blessed be He. Concerning the one who is forced (raped) it is written in Torah “and she shall be his wife...he can never have the right to divorce her”, it is not so concerning the seducer. Since the law of rape is according to that which is done, for the rapist has compelled the virgin into marriage and anything that is compelled is binding. That is why he cannot divorce her, because of that which he himself did by compelled marriage; therefore there is no release at all. Therefore, Hashem, who is blessed, overturned the mountain upon them like an [inverted] cask so that the partnership would be compelled. And there is no leave or release from any coupling or partnership that is compelled, just as the man who rapes a woman...

...Therefore, He overturned the mountain upon them like an [inverted] cask, by means of a compelled partnership and it was not a thing that it was possible it will be or will not be. For after the acceptance of the Torah the entire world was completed, how could that only be something possible?

argument that could be read as a polemical claim against the Christian world that God established a new covenant that superseded that which he made with the Jewish people. He quotes a midrash which is unknown, that makes an astonishing claim: In the Torah, if a man rapes a woman he has to marry her and cannot divorce her – this is understood to be a strategy to protect the woman from complete societal degradation. Having been violated and forcibly raped she cannot be left as 'damaged' but must be offered rights and status in the rapist's household (this is unlike the legal case of seduction, in which force is not used). The Maharal argues that this can be used as a metaphor for the experience of the Israelites at Sinai. They were coerced by God with the overturned mountain as if they had been raped. In doing this, God was compelled to marry the Israelites and could never break the covenant struck at Sinai.

The Maharal therefore asserts that the compulsion at Sinai is a coercion on both sides. There is no escape from being Jewish and fulfilling the metaphysical destiny of the Jewish people – that is the part of the essential way of the world. Equally, God cannot leave the covenant, God is forced to maintain the divine obligations too.

Brief Discussion of Text 6

There are a lot of points for discussion in this commentary by the Maharal. At its heart there are two major claims: the covenant struck at Sinai had to be compelled because Torah, the Jewish people and the Jewish people's acceptance of the covenant is fundamental to the existence of the world and, secondly, neither God nor the Jewish people can quit the covenant.

The Maharal is known to have a view of the world that the Jewish people are the essence of creation (something he claims in another commentary known as *Netzach Yisrael*). This belief is held to the point of arguing that the rest of the world are, in a sense, an accident of creation. The strength of this belief is one reason why the Maharal is considered by some to be a highly problematic thinker (and equally it is probably partly the reason why his writing has seen a resurgence in the 20th and 21st Century – along with its mystical bent). We can contextualise the belief to a Christian world which also held deeply problematic and anti-Semitic views of Jews – it may therefore be understood to be a counterclaim. That however does not lessen how wrong it may seem to us today.

This leads to the second point, which is an even stronger and more overt polemic – that the Jewish people and, more specifically, God, cannot leave the covenant (and we might add – to make a new one with the Christian world). In fact, this is a double claim – one against Christianity, but the other against God. This follows in the footsteps of other midrashim which make a profound cry against heaven and protest the treatment of the Jewish people at God's hands. There are midrashim that liken Israel to a wife who has become an *agunah* (a chained woman – in the sense that her husband, God, has deserted her but not allowed her to divorce) and another in which she is likened to a wife who is beaten by her husband (God). The Maharal clearly follows in line with these protest midrashim – calling upon God to remember that there is no divorce from the Jewish people and the covenant.

Questions

1. The Maharal emphasises the words of Resh Lakish – that effectively the creation of the world was only completed, or perhaps fulfilled, with the giving and acceptance of Torah. What does it mean to say that the world was only completed at this moment? How do we feel about the Maharal's understanding of the essential nature of the Jewish people and creation?
2. If the covenant was re-accepted in the days of Ahasuerus then when was the creation of the world completed?
3. The Torah, according to the Maharal, is one part of the natural order of things – the way nature behaves. How does that influence our understanding of the coercion at Sinai – can we 'break off the yoke' from our necks? Can we ever not be Jewish or is being Jewish part of our essential make-up even in a time of multiple identities?
4. What does it mean to compare our covenantal relationship with God as one that is founded on act of sexual violence, such as rape?
5. What do you think about the Maharal's protest against God? Can this contribute towards adult discussions about theology?

A Final Idea

In the 20th Century a different theological response was formed by some, arguing that in light of the Holocaust the covenant had been broken by God. The death of God became part of Jewish theology, however not in a literal sense, but rather that the 'idea' or 'belief' in God had died.