

Thy Rod and Thy Staff, They Comfort Me. . . .

An analysis of rods and staffs in the Bible.

Peter Levy

Academy for Jewish Religion / Gratz College

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Introduction

“Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me.” It is a beautiful image of a Divine stick that supports us when we are feeling weak and challenged. As one who was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis about 8 years ago and now walks with a cane, it resonates even more deeply with me. More recently, because of some lower back problems, I was forced to wear a kind of girdle-like brace for my back. And finally, this January, the brace was replaced by titanium screws and rods that were physically implanted in and attached to my spine. The rods became a part of my internal structure; they became a part of who and what I am.

This led me to reconsider my feelings as to whether the rods and staffs that support us are internal or external. We can lean on a cane and also on those around us, but where does the true support actually manifest itself. I now believe that it is the internal support that we really need when we are feeling weak.

The Physics of Support

If I stand up and put my feet together, my area of support, the area bounded by the balls of my feet and the middle of my heels is approximately six by eight inches, or 48 square inches. For me to avoid falling over, I need to keep my center of mass above that small area of contact with the floor. In a typical human being, that center of mass is in the middle of the body, just below the navel. This is about 36 inches above the floor. Therefore, after some mathematical calculations, I find that if I lean as little as six degrees to either side or almost five degrees forward or backward, I will fall over unless I move my feet. This significantly unstable stance is based upon my standing on a space that can be compared to a dimensionless point. If I then

move one of my feet to the side, along a one dimensional line, I can significantly widen my base of support and I will be much more stable along that horizontal axis. However, I still maintain my instability on the forward/backward axis. Since I can only move my feet in either one of two directions, I need the third point of a staff or cane to increase my one dimensional stability of side to side to the two dimensional stability of the flat plane of the ground. The point of the cane needs to be off of the line of support provided by my spread footed stance. The further off the line the point of the cane is, the broader my support becomes and the more stable I become.

So what is the point of this physics lesson?

We all need some kind of support in our lives, at one time or another. The more significant the instability of the moment, the more we need to broaden our base and the more support we need from that outside stability provider, the point of the staff. The 23rd Psalm is often seen as a classic example of that kind of outside support. It is read at every Jewish funeral and any ritual or service commemorating death or loss.

א מְזֻמֹּר לְדָוִד ה' רֵעִי לֹא אֶחְסָר: ב בְּנֵאוֹת דְּשָׂא יִרְבִּיצֵנִי עַל־מֵי מְנַחוֹת יִנְהַלֵּנִי: ג נִפְשִׁי יִשׁוּבֵב יִנְחֵנִי בְּמַעְגְלֵי־צֶדֶק לְמַעַן שְׁמוֹ: ד גַּם כִּי־אֵלֶּה בְּגֵיא צְלֻמוֹת לֹא־אִירָא רָע כִּי־אֵתָהּ עִמָּדִי שִׁבְטְךָ וּמִשְׁעֲנֶתְךָ הִמָּה יִנְחֲמֵנִי: ה תַּעֲרֶךְ לִפְנֵי שְׁלַחַן נֹגֵד צַרְרִי דִשְׁנֶת בְּשִׁמּוֹן רֹאשִׁי כּוֹסֵי רִוְיָה: ו אַךְ טוֹב וְחֶסֶד יִרְדְּפוּנִי כָּל־יְמֵי חַיִּי וְשִׁבְתִּי בְּבֵית־י ה' לְאָרְךָ יָמִים:

Psalm 23:1 A Psalm of David. The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. ² He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; He leadeth me beside the still waters. ³ He restoreth my soul; He guideth me in straight paths for His name's sake. ⁴ Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me. ⁵ Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; Thou hast anointed my head with oil; my cup runneth over. ⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

The most crucial word in this psalm, in my opinion, comes in verse 4: וּמִשְׁעַנְתְּךָ, your staff, or more properly, your cane. This root שענ means “to lean”. This is the only word for rod or staff that we find that is truly the support for the weak. All the others, , שבט, , מטה, מקל, חטן, and בד, are mostly symbols of power or authority. These distinctions get lost in translation, especially when they are all translated as either rod or staff. Surely, there are many synonyms available in English, as well. The choice of staff instead of cane opens up a whole new realm of questions such as: Why does God have or need a cane? Is there a deeper meaning to the use of the various words for rod, staff, and cane than the simple *peshat*? Or is it the simple *peshat* of the different words in Hebrew that we lose in the English? If we are true to the various meanings of the different words, we may gain a better understanding of the 23rd psalm. We may find that it is, in fact not an outside support that we really need but, an internal support that will truly help us stand up straight.

The list of rods and staffs

The word שבט, *shevet*

A primary meaning of *shevet* , as it is explained in sources like the Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon, is in relation to a rod or staff of authority. The word also means tribe. To combine the two meanings creates a royal scepter type of implement. It denotes the power of the office of leadership or authority. The BDB also points out that the 11th month of Shevat is a borrowed word from the Babylonian for striking, since that is the late winter/early month when harsh rains can destroy newly planted crops. Perhaps this is the basis for the usage in Exodus 21:20 where a *shevet* is used to strike a bondsman:

וְכִי־יִכֶּה אִישׁ אֶת־עַבְדּוֹ אוֹ אֶת־אִמָּתוֹ בַּשֶּׁבֶט

if a man strikes a slave or handmaid with a staff.

But again, it overlaps with the symbol of authority since it would take a person in authority to beat a slave. Perhaps it is a rejoining of two lines deriving from a cognate root.

The word *מטה*, *mateh*

When one looks in the BDB, one finds *mateh* in several adjacent sections. The primary origin of the letters *mem*, *tet*, *heh*, comes out of the root *נטה*, *noteh*, for “to spread out, to extend, to incline or bend.” We will see the bending idea extended into the concept of perversion of justice, bending it so far that it breaks, in the blessings and curses on the Mounts Gerizim and Ebal, in Deuteronomy. The spreading out also includes the idea of a bed, where one spreads out or reclines. For the most part, I will ignore these forms since they are not necessarily relevant to the topic at hand.

The relevant meaning of the three letters in question is their meaning as rod, staff, or symbol of authority. It appears that it is simply a stretched out or elongated stick, and that its name comes from its length.

The word *מקל*, *makeil*

Again, we have another synonym for a rod or staff, but the authority component is missing. There is a definite plant-like nature to this word. We will find it used in the story of Jacob genetically engineering his flock before his departure from the house of Laban. He uses plant stalks that have been partially stripped to effect a positive outcome on the animals that will be his inherited flock. These, also, have more of a magical component to them than some of the other words for staffs, as we will see when we get into the prophets.

The word חטר, *choter*

This word appears twice in the Bible, once in Proverbs and again in Isaiah. Its meaning is similar to the plant-like nature of *makeil* above. It refers to a plant shoot, or a branch used as a rod or switch.

The word בַּד, *bad*

The *badim* were the rods that were inserted into the rings attached to the Ark of the Covenant and other sacred transportable objects. These rods facilitated the carrying of these items. They were never to be removed (Exodus 25:15). Exodus and Numbers are the main appearances of this word, but Isaiah seems to use it, in one case, with a different meaning, that being braggadocio or bravado (again meaning support, but perhaps in this case, false support).

The word מִשְׁעַן, *mish'an*

This is probably the most important word on the list, due to its radically different etymology. It comes from the root for “to lean.” It is the only word on the list that has true cane-like implications. It rarely appears in Torah, but when it does, as in Exodus 21:19, it is as a cane. Here, if one person assaults another and he does not die,

אִם-יָקוּם וְהִתְהַלֵּךְ בַּחוּץ עַל-מִשְׁעָנָתוֹ
but gets up to walk on his cane,

the assaulter is liable for damages for lost time. But again, this is the true meaning of a cane, a physical support to the unsteady of foot. And yet, in the next verse, 21:20, there is the other condition where someone assaults another and he dies, but here the weapon is a *shevet*, a stick of authority. So we very quickly get a distinguishing between two types of sticks, a cane and a weapon, each described with a different noun in Hebrew. When we constantly use only two

words in English, rod and staff, we lose much of the nuanced differences between the different types of rods, staffs, and sticks that are used in very different settings in the Bible. One might actually have expected the JPS translator to insert the word cane instead of staff.

As we will see later, this *mish'an* is God's cane. It is the real support for those who are downtrodden. In the case of Exodus 21:19 it is simply an *ish*, a man, who is the beneficiary of God's support. He is no one special or exalted, he is just a person in need of a cane to endure the trauma inflicted on him.

Occurrences in the Bible

The various names of rods and staffs are used throughout the Bible. I will endeavor to show how the different names come to be used for consistently different purposes. The distinctions in the Hebrew are often lost in English translation since the different Hebrew words are usually translated as rod or staff, no matter which word is used in the Hebrew.

Jacob and Laban – Genesis 30

וַיִּקַּח-לוֹ יַעֲקֹב מַקֵּל לַבְּנֵה לַח וְלִזְז וְעֶרְמוֹן וַיִּפְצֹל בָּהֶן פְּצָלוֹת לְבָנוֹת מִחֹשֶׁף הַלָּבָן אֲשֶׁר
עַל-הַמִּקְלוֹת:

And Jacob took for himself a rod of fresh poplar, and the almond and the plane-tree; and peeled white streaks in them, making the white appear which was in the rods.

Here he uses the *makeil*, the striped plant stalks to affect the breeding of the lambs so that the flock that he will take, as his portion when he leaves, is superior in size and strength to the remaining sheep that will be left with Laban.

Sometimes a stick is a stick, or is it? – Genesis 32

Jacob is about to confront his brother Esau for the first time since he fled in fear of Esau's vengeance. He has divided his household into two parts as a defensive maneuver and he beseeches God for protection.

קִטְנִיתִי מִכָּל הַחֲסָדִים וּמִכָּל־הָאֱמֶת אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתָ אֶת־עַבְדְּךָ כִּי בְּמִקְלִי עָבַרְתִּי אֶת־הַיַּרְדֵּן
הַזֶּה וְעַתָּה הֵייתִי לְשְׁנֵי מַחֲנֹת:

I am made small from all of the kindnesses and all of the truths that you have done for me, your servant. For with my staff I have crossed this Jordan, and now I became two camps.

This verse is full of possible foreshadowing. Jacob used his staff to cross the Jordan and Moses used his staff to cross the Sea of Reeds (or did he use his hand?). In this crossing process, both Moses and Jacob divided something; Moses the sea of water and Jacob the sea that was his family. Jacob used his *makeil* and Moses used his *mateh*. Or is a staff simply something you use to steady yourself when walking on the unsteady and possibly murky sea bottom when passing between divided waters?

Judah and Tamar – Genesis 38

Our next encounter with a rod or staff in the Torah is the story of Judah and his daughter-in-law, Tamar. Here we find Tamar left without a husband after the death of two of Judah's sons, one an original marriage to her and the other a levirate marriage to her. She is sent to her father's house to await the maturity of a third son of Judah for a second levirate marriage. She, instead, places herself at the side of a road that she knows Judah will pass and poses as a prostitute. He engages her services and leaves his *mateh*, his rod, as security until he sends her a kid as payment.

וַיֹּאמֶר מָה הָעֵרְבוֹן אֲשֶׁר אֶתֶּן-לָךְ וַתֹּאמֶר חֹתֶמְךָ וּפְתִילְךָ וּמִטָּה אֲשֶׁר בְּיָדְךָ

And he said: 'What pledge shall I give thee?' And she said: 'Thy signet and thy cord, and thy staff that is in thy hand.' (Gen 38:18)

Later in verse 25 she reveals herself, as Tamar, to be pregnant and is accused of harlotry by Judah. She brings forth the un-claimed staff as a subtle reminder to Judah of ultimate responsibility for his part in the act in question. So here again, we have a simple example of a rod or staff as a sign of position and authority.

We find a similar type of reference to a staff of authority in a papyrus dating back to the 15th century BCE. In it, the taking of Joppa by Thoth, an emissary of Thut-mose III of Egypt, is recounted. It seems that Thoth is discussing terms of surrender with the Enemy of Joppa, this being the besieged residents of Joppa.

“And [the Enemy of Joppa wanted to see the great staff of] King Men-kheper-Re – life, prosperity, health – and they came and reported (this) to Thoth. Then [the Enemy of Jo]ppa said to Thoth: “I want to see the great staff of King Men-kheper-Re – life, prosperity, health! – of [which] the name is . . . –the Beautiful. By the ka of King Men-kheper-Re – life, prosperity, health! – if ou have it today, (10) . . . good, and bring it to me!”

And he did so and brought the great staff of King Men-kheper-Re, [and he laid hold of]his cloak, and he stood upright, and said: “Look at me, O Enemy of [Joppa! Behold] the King Men-kheper-Re – life, prosperity, health! – the fierce lion, the son of Sekhmet! Amon gave him his [victory]!” [And he] raised his [hand] and sruck the Enemy of Joppa on the forehead. And he fell down, . . . (ANET p.23)

Even though the staff is the staff of the King, when it comes to striking down the enemy the staff is not used, he uses his hand instead. We will see Moses and Aaron practice this same

“ambidexterity” when they inflict the plagues on Egypt. The staff is, once again, the symbol of authority, but not magic or might.

The Encounter at the Burning Bush – Exodus 4

Moses’ staff is often thought to be of a different nature than other rods and staffs in the Bible. From the beginning, in the encounter at the burning bush (Exodus 3-4), there is a sense about that difference. Moses is tending Jethro’s flocks and he sees a bush in flames, but not being consumed. An angel calls to him from the bush and a Divine encounter ensues. Moses is given the mission to return to his people but expresses doubts about his ability to convince the people of the True Source of his mission. God asks him, what will turn out to be, a fateful question.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים ה' מַזָּה [מֵהַזֶּה] בְּיָדְךָ וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה.

God said to him, “What is that in your hand?” He answered, “A staff.” (Exodus 4:2)

The word is the same *mateh* as in Judah’s encounter with Tamar, but as the Torah unfolds, we will see, through text and midrash that this *mateh* may not be the same as Judah’s *mateh*. Here we face the same problem as we do in English, that being that the same word has a substantially different meaning. In Exodus 4:20 the staff even acquires a new name, מִטֵּה הָאֱלֹהִים, the staff of God. This staff will seem to be unlike any other staff that we will encounter. Its new name tells us that it is not like the staff of Judah. Instead, it indicates that it is linked to God’s Power and therefore it will be subject to deeper scrutiny and discussion. The simple fact that God asks Moses “What is that in your hand?” arouses curiosity. One has to

assume that God knows what it is, so I would infer that it is a rhetorical question that is more likely to mean “do you realize what you really have in your hand?”

Rashi elucidates further on this questioning by suggesting that, perhaps God is really prodding Moses to think outside the box. He writes, in his commentary on these verses, that it is like two men who confront each other. One asks if the other believes that an object before them is stone. When the second agrees, the first one then turns it into wood.

Here we find a potential conflict between the two concepts of the staff outlined above. Is Moses’ staff the actual conduit for or simply the reminder of God’s true Might and Power? At God’s insistence, he throws the staff to the ground and it becomes a snake, one of the creatures that strikes fear in the heart of Egyptians since it hides in the sand or at the edge of the murky waters of the Nile. In Rashi’s and other’s commentary we find the conjecture that just as God afflicted the snake when he misled Eve, so also does the commentator suggest that God will afflict Moses for his slander of the Israelites, that being Moses’ assumption that they will not listen to him. However, if Moses deserves to be beaten with the staff for slandering the Israelite people before the fact, one would be surprised that a “staff of God” would be used for punishment of God’s messenger, Moses. The midrash is clearly very different from the peshat and therefore we need to differentiate between the two. In this case, each is used for a very different purpose, whereas sometimes the midrash simply elucidates or fills in a gap in the peshat.

Next, at God’s behest Moses puts his hand in his garment and pulls it out and sees a *tzaraat* afflicting it. When he hides and then brings his hand out again, the affliction is gone. These incidents, the afflicted hand and the snake/staff conversion act on many levels. They could

establish the staff as a possible conduit of God's power and therefore begin to establish Moses as one who will bring fear into the hearts of the Egyptians. However, these two transformations could also be simple reminders of God's Might and Power. God reassures Moses in 3:12, when Moses questions the likelihood of the people listening to him as he returns to lead them out of Egypt, saying: כִּי־אֶהְיֶה עִמָּךְ "because I will be with you." Maybe it is the Divine Presence that is with Moses that facilitates the signs and wonders in the eyes of Egypt and of Israel and not any rod or staff.

And finally, as Moses prepares to leave this encounter to return to Yitro, collect his family, and go back to Egypt, an interesting thing happens. In Exodus 4:17 God reminds Moses:

וְאֶת־הַמִּטֶּה הַזֶּה תִּקַּח בְּיָדְךָ אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשֶׂה־בוֹ אֶת־הָאֵתוֹת:

And you will take this staff in your hand, with which you will do the signs (wonders).

Now we have a quandary. Was Moses about to forget the staff that he had brought to the bush? Was God giving Moses a different staff? Was this the magical staff of the midrash? The commentators are also concerned with this text. It only refers to the "miracle" of the rod turning into a snake. Nachmanides assumes that God had revealed to Moses all of the details of the signs that were to be performed and that the redactors of the Torah simplified the scenario, knowing that we would learn them in their proper time.

Rabbi Obadiah ben Jacob Sforno takes a slightly different tack, in his commentary on this text, one that resonates with me. The true power comes from God with Moses being the appointed messenger who has the power to "change the laws of nature," but only with God's permission.

וְאֵת הַמַּטֵּה הַזֶּה. וְאָף עַל פִּי שְׂאִינוּ מִמִּין עֵץ חָשׁוּב, הִנֵּה קִדְשָׁתִיו לְהִיּוֹת לָךְ לְאוֹת .
And this staff: And even if it is not from important wood, behold I have sanctified it to be for you as a sign.

תִּקַּח בְּיָדְךָ . לְשִׁבְט מוֹשֵׁל, שְׂמִנִּיתִיךָ לְשִׁנוֹת אֶת הַטֹּבֵעַ בְּמִצְוֹתֶיךָ .
Take it in your hand as a ruler's symbol: That I have appointed you to change Nature at your command.

אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשֶׂה בּוֹ אֶת הָאֵתָת. שְׂתַצְוֶה לְטֹבֵעַ בְּמִצְוֹתַי מִצַּד מֵה שְׂמִנִּיתִיךָ לָזֶה.
That with it you will do the signs: That you will command Nature with your command from the place that I have appointed you in this.

It is interesting to note that Sforno lived in the sixteenth century, after the midrashim appeared that treat Moses' staff as a magical staff, made of a special magical material. It is almost as if Sforno is trying to remind us of the original and true source of magic and power. Only God can change the laws of nature. Or maybe Moses can, but only with God's seal of authority.

After all, in Exodus 3:20 we read:

וְשִׁלַּחְתִּי אֶת־יָדִי וְהִכִּיתִי אֶת־מִצְרַיִם בְּכֹל נִפְלְאוֹתַי אֲשֶׁר אֶעֱשֶׂה בְּקִרְבּוֹ וְאַחֲרֵי־כֵן יִשְׁלַח אֶתְכֶם:

And I will send forth my hand and smite the Egyptians with all of my wonders that I will do in their midst, and after that he will send you out.

So this sort of answers the questions before they are even asked. God, with the mighty hand, will work the wonders, miracles, and signs. It will not be Moses or Aaron or their rods or hands, it will be God. They will be the messengers or emissaries.

Moses and Aaron confront Pharaoh – Exodus 7

Our next encounter with a *mateh* is in Exodus 7:10, in Moses and Aaron's first encounter with Pharaoh and his court magicians. As commanded by God, when they are brought before Pharaoh, Aaron throws his staff on the ground and, just like Moses' staff at the bush, it is transformed. But his staff is not changed into a שָׂרָפ, a snake as at the burning bush, instead

Aaron's staff is turned into a **נָחָשׁ**, a serpent of some kind. Some say it was either a snake, like Moses' encounter at the bush, while others say a crocodile. In either case, the animal in question would have been disconcerting to the Egyptians. This word is translated as various kinds of monsters and beasts throughout the Bible. In any case, "the fear of snakes and scorpions in the ground, of crocodiles in the water, . . . was ever-present in ancient Egypt." (ANETp. 326) What follows is an Egyptian charm against snakes that was inscribed on the inside of pyramids of the Pharaohs to protect their bodies from snakes that might enter the tombs.

Back with thee, hidden snake! Hide thyself! Thou shalt not make King Unis see thee. Back with thee, hidden snake! Hide thyself! Thou shalt not come to the place where King Unis is, lest he tell that name of thine against thee: Nemi, the son of Nemit. The serpent of the Ennead fell into the Nile. Turn about, turn about! O monster, lie down!" (ANET p. 326)

So, since the Egyptians were afraid of these animals, whether it was a snake, a serpent, or a crocodile is irrelevant. Moses' and Aaron's staffs were immediately presenting a threat to their well-being. Interestingly enough however, the magicians were able to transform their rods into serpents as well. But, as a show of strength and superiority, Aaron's rod swallowed up their rods. Note, however, that it was the rod of Aaron that swallowed the rods of the magicians, not the rod of Moses and not the serpents of either party who swallowed or were swallowed. Was this all an illusion orchestrated by Moses and his staff? Were the rods really transformed into serpents at all? Or, since it was Aaron's rod that was involved, are we now removed from the rod of Moses and direct intervention through his staff?

ויבלע מטה אהרן את מטתם אמר רבי אלעזר: נס בתוך נס.
And Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs. Said Rabbi Elazar, a miracle within a miracle.
BT Shabbat 97a

If Aaron's rod can be part of a miracle, this reinforces the premise that there is no real exclusivity of Moses' staff as the Divine conduit. It would seem now, that either Moses' or Aaron's staff is capable of wielding some kind of special power.

The Plagues- Exodus 8 - 10

Soon thereafter, we find that Aaron's role has been raised from mouthpiece for Moses to one who has the power to cause plagues to fall over Egypt. He is the one who inflicts the first plague on the Egyptians but it is not clear as to whether he uses his staff or his hand. In 7:19 God tells Moses to tell Aaron to:

קח מִטֵּבֶה וּנְטֵה-יָדְךָ עַל-מִיַּיִם מִצְרַיִם
“take your staff and extend your hand over the waters of Egypt.”

So what Aaron holds out over the waters of Egypt is not clear, and also if he follows God's instructions correctly, since the text says in the next verse:

וַיִּרָם בַּמִּטֵּה וַיַּךְ אֶת-הַמַּיִם .
“and he lifted up the staff and he struck the waters” .

This will be the beginning of an analytical problem. We will find that both Moses and Aaron are capable of inflicting plagues on Egypt, and they are able to inflict these plagues by rod or by hand. So here we have the first question of tool or weapon. Whether it was with his staff or his hand that he struck the waters, they are turned to blood. This cannot be an illusion, it has to be Divine intervention, but we don't know the implement of change, rod or hand.

In chapter 8 a further weakening of the image of the “supernatural rod” occurs.

א וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אָמַר אֶל־אַהֲרֹן נֹטֵה אֶת־יָדְךָ בַּמֶּטֶק עַל־הַנְּהָרֹת עַל־הַיְאֻרִים
וְעַל־הָאֲגָמִים וְהַעַל אֶת־הַצְּפֹרְדָּעִים עַל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם: ב וַיִּט אַהֲרֹן אֶת־יָדוֹ עַל מִיַּי מִצְרָיִם
וַתַּעַל הַצְּפֹרְדָּע וַתִּכַּס אֶת־אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:

And the LORD said unto Moses: Say unto Aaron: Stretch forth thy hand with thy rod over the rivers, over the canals, and over the pools, and cause frogs to come up upon the land of Egypt.

And Aaron stretched out his hand over the waters of Egypt; and the frogs came up, and covered the land of Egypt.

(Exodus 8:1-2)

Here, there is a true question of interpretation. Has Aaron inflicted this plague by hand and not by rod? Was the rod in his hand? Did he disobey God once again and use his hand instead of the rod? If so, what will happen to Aaron since it will be this type of insolence (mistakenly using the incorrect implement, the rod or the hand) that will cause Moses to be prevented from entering the Promised Land? We will find that Aaron does not get to enter the Promised Land either, he dies in Numbers 20. The reason given is:

וַיִּגְרַף אַהֲרֹן אֶל־עַמּוּיוֹ כִּי לֹא יָבֹא אֶל־הָאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל אֲשֶׁר־מְרִיתֶם אֶת־פִּי
לְיַי מְרִיבָה:

And Aaron was gathered to his ancestors because he will not enter into the Promised Land that I will give to the children of Israel because of your disobedience of my words at the waters of Meribah.

Maybe a better translation of *עַל אֲשֶׁר־מְרִיתֶם* could be “for the same reason as the disobedience” at Meribah. There Moses misused the staff and here Aaron misused a staff, also, in the eyes of the multitudes.

Later, however, in this same chapter, there is no question that Moses is instructed to tell Aaron to use his rod to inflict the plague of lice.

יב וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אָמַר אֶל־אַהֲרֹן נֹטֵה אֶת־מֶטֶק וְהָךְ אֶת־עַפַּר הָאֶרֶץ

And the LORD said unto Moses: 'Say unto Aaron: Stretch out thy rod, and smite the dust of the earth,
(Exodus 8:12)

In Exodus 9:23, the staff comes into play again.

וַיִּט מֹשֶׁה אֶת־מִטְהוֹ עַל־הַשָּׁמַיִם ! ה' נָתַן קֶלֶת וּבָרַד וַתִּהְלֶךְ־אֵשׁ אַרְצָה וַיִּמְטַר ה' בָּרָד
עַל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:

And Moses stretched his rod toward heaven; and the LORD sent thunder and hail, and fire went out onto the earth; and God caused hail to rain upon the land of Egypt.

So here we have Moses extending his *mateh* toward the heavens but God inflicts the plague. In the verse before, 9:22, we find that Moses was instructed to extend his hand toward Heaven to bring down the plague of hail.

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה נָטֵה אֶת־יָדְךָ עַל־הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיְהִי בָרָד בְּכָל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם

And God said to Moses, stretch out your hand to the Heavens and there will be hail in all of the land of Egypt.

Moses continues to be challenged by conflicting instructions from God as to how to wield Divine Power and also who would wield it. To further confuse matters, in verse 29, Moses offers to end the plague of hail, but with his own outstretched hands. It seems that he finally remembered the command in verse 22 and not the action that brought the hail in verse 23.

כֹּט וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו מֹשֶׁה כְּצִאתִי אֶת־הָעִיר אֶפְרֹשׁ אֶת־כַּפֵּי אֶל־ה'

And Moses said unto him: 'As soon as I am gone out of the city, I will spread forth my hands unto the LORD;

In Exodus 10:12-13 we go back to the rod.

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה נָטֵה יָדְךָ עַל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בְּאַרְבֶּה וַיַּעַל עַל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וַיֵּאָכֵל
אֶת־כָּל־עֵשֶׂב הָאָרֶץ אֶת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר הַשָּׂאִיר הַבָּרָד: וַיִּט מֹשֶׁה אֶת־מִטְהוֹ עַל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם ! ה'
נָהַג רֹחַ־קָדִים בְּאֶרֶץ

And God said to Moses: 'Stretch out your hand over the land of Egypt for locusts, that they may come up on the land of Egypt, and eat all the herbage of the land,

even all that remained from the hail.' And Moses stretched out his rod over the land of Egypt, and God brought an east wind upon the land.

One has to understand that a sense of confusion might be descending over Moses and Aaron as to who is to inflict plagues and how to inflict them. Is it the rod in the hand? Is it the hand without the rod? Whose rod and whose hand? One could say that either Moses or Aaron should use the rod in the hand, but that is not the *peshat* of the text. Literally they are given conflicting instructions, sometimes a rod and sometimes a hand.

In Exodus 10:21, God prepares to inflict the plague of darkness on Egypt and he tells Moses to extend his hand, not his *mateh*, to the heavens. The plague of darkness falls over Egypt as a result of Moses' outstretched hand. So, again and again throughout the infliction of the plagues, we find that there is no consistent inflictor of the plagues. Sometimes it is Moses and sometimes it is Aaron and sometimes it is by hand and sometimes by rod. We will find this same lack of clarity as to the actual implement of change, in later verses, at the parting of the Red Sea and the waters of Meribah.

The preparation for the departure –Exodus 11

The *makeil* returns in verse 11.

וְכַכֵּה תֹאכְלוּ אֹתוֹ מִתְנִיכֵם חֲגָרִים נְעִלֵיכֶם בְּרַגְלֵיכֶם וּמִקְלֵיכֶם בְּיָדְכֶם וְאָכַלְתֶּם אֹתוֹ בְּחֶפְזוֹן
פֶּסַח הוּא לַיהוָה

And thus you will eat it, your loins girded, you sandals on your feet, and your rods/canes in your hands. And you will eat it in a hurry. It is a Pesach to God.

A walking stick is a walking stick. It supports you as you walk.

The parting of the Red Sea – Exodus 14

Here we come to one of the greatest cinematic events of all time. Moses is standing on the shores of the Red Sea (Sea of Reeds?), the wind is blowing his flowing mane, the waters are roaring, and the Egyptian chariots are approaching. He lifts his staff, the waters part and the Israelites descend into the ravine formed between the churning waters and they flee to safety on the other side. Moses appears on the other side of the sea, again raises his staff and the Egyptians drown in the returning waters. But is that really what happened? See verse 16.

וְאַתָּה הָרַם אֶת־מִטְּךָ וַנְּטֵה אֶת־יָדְךָ עַל־הַיָּם וּבָקַעְתָּהּ וַיָּבֵאוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּתוֹךְ הַיָּם בַּיַּבֶּשֶׁה:

And you, raise up your staff and spread your hand over the water and divide it.
And the children of Israel will come between the waters on the dry land.

But just a few verses later, in verse 21:

וַיִּט מֹשֶׁה אֶת־יָדוֹ עַל־הַיָּם וַיּוֹלֶךְ ה' אֶת־הַיָּם בְּרוּחַ קְדִים עֲזָה כָּל־הַלַּיְלָה וַיִּשָּׂם אֶת־הַיָּם לְחֶרֶבָה וַיִּבָּקְעוּ הַמַּיִם:

And Moses spread out his hand over the water, and God went to the water in a strong East wind all the night, and He made the sea like dry land and He divided the sea.

What happened to the staff? Did he raise it up before extending his hand? Perhaps it is as in the early rabbinic midrash, the Mekhilta deRabbi Ishmael, that opines as follows. Moses raised his hand but the sea did not split. He then raised the staff, but again the sea did not split. It was only when God appeared on the scene that the seas finally split.

Maybe this is why Moses raised his hands but the seas did not split till after the night. He didn't follow the instructions. This could also be further support for the idea that God is the source for the power and might. The hands, rods, and staffs are just the reminders of God's might. It would lend credence to the opinion that the idea of magic and power residing in the staff was a later arrival on the interpretive scene.

The waters of Meribah – v1.0 – Exodus 17:5

The Israelites are about a month and a half out of Egypt and they are already becoming recalcitrant. God has just given them manna but they are still unhappy. Sinai is still a few weeks away, they are encamped at Rephidim, and water is in short supply. The people approach Moses asking for water and Moses consults with God.

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה עֲבֹר לִפְנֵי הָעָם וְקַח אֶתְךָ מִזְקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וּמִטָּךְ אֲשֶׁר הִכִּיתָ בּוֹ אֶת-הַיָּאֵר
קַח בְּיָדְךָ וְהִלַּקְתָּ: הַנִּי עֹמֵד לִפְנֵיךָ שָׁם | עַל-הַצּוּר בְּחֶרֶב וְהִכִּיתָ בַצּוּר וַיֵּצְאוּ מִמֶּנּוּ מַיִם
וְשָׁתָה הָעָם

And God said to Moses, “Cross before the people and take with you the elders of Israel and your staff that you used to smite the river. Take it in your hand and go. I will be standing there, before you, on the rock in Horeb, and you will strike the rock and water will flow from it and the people can drink.

At first glance, it seems that Moses is working the “magic” with his staff. He hits the rock and the water flows forth. However, it doesn’t take a very deep reading to question who really brought forth the water from the rock. If God is there on the rock, apparently invisible to the people, Moses seems to be the front man for the “man behind the curtain.” Again, it is God and not Moses who changes the laws of nature, or as Sforino comments, Moses is doing it with God’s permission, but not necessarily with the staff.

The staff as true and simple support – Leviticus 26:26

Here in Leviticus, we find a true and literal occurrence of the staff as support.

When I break your staff of bread,

בְּשִׁבְרֵי לֶחֶם מִטֶּה־לְחֶם

As Rashi points out in his commentary, this is a simple reference to the concept of a staff as support. Since bread supports life as fundamental nutrition, it is the “staff of life.”

The Shepherds crook – Leviticus 27:32

Finally, here in Leviticus, we find a simple shepherd’s staff or crook. No magic, no power, no illusions, just the simple crook. Oddly enough, this is one of the only times in the bible that it is used with this plain and simple meaning. Granted, when Moses was minding the flock of Yitro, it is assumed that the stick that he brought with him was a shepherd’s crook of some kind, but very quickly it becomes much more than that. But, then again, here too it has some inference of Divine authority for selection of the animals to be tithed.

וְכָל־מַעֲשֵׂר בְּקָר וְצֹאן כֹּל אֲשֶׁר־יַעֲבֹר תַּחַת הַשֶּׁבֶט הָעֹשִׂי יְיָ אֱלֹהֵי־קֹדֶשׁ לַיהוָה:

And every tenth of your cattle or flock, all that pass under the crook, the tenth will be sanctified to God.

The *mateh* as tribe – Numbers 1, 2, and 3

As we begin the book of Numbers, we find the *mateh* as the tribe. As happens so often at transition points, a census is taken. At the end of Leviticus the law has been given and the Israelites are setting out for the Promised Land from Sinai. It is important to count heads and ascertain how many people are in the caravan. So we will find, through these early chapters of Numbers, that the *mateh* is simply the tribe. The leader of a tribe had a staff of authority so

that when one counted the number of people under that authority, one was, in a way, counting the *mateh* or more appropriately, the *shevet*.

Numbers 1:4 begins with the mention of the *mateh* as the tribe, the unit that has someone with a ceremonial staff at its head. Numbers 1:16 continues this usage and in verse 21 the actual accounting begins. פְּקְדֵיהֶם לְמַטֵּה is the phrase that begins the accounting of each tribe, “they mustered the tribe of . . .” We confirm this meaning with the parallel usage in 2:9, כָּל־הַפְּקָדִים לְמַחֲנֵה יְהוּדָה, “all that were accounted from the camp of Judah . . .” We see the words *mateh*/tribe and *machaneh*/camp used as synonyms.

This use of *mateh* as tribe continues through chapter 10 as the tribes assemble and begin their journey onward. Trumpets are blown, standards are raised, and the children of Israel break camp and move on.

Aaron vs. Korach – Numbers 17

In 17:16, we come to the aftermath of Korah and his rebellion. He and his family have just been swallowed up by the Earth and the Israelites are in some disarray as to who is in charge. God tells Moses, in verse 16, to have every tribal leader bring their *mateh* to the Tent of Meeting where they will be presented before God. The staff of the true leader of the people will flower and bud to indicate the house of leadership. Sure enough, Aaron’s staff blossomed to confirm his and his tribe’s status of leadership. However, in chapter 20, once again the nature of the staff comes into question.

The waters of Meribah – v2.0 - Numbers 20:7

The Israelites are in Kadesh and Miriam has just died. Moses finds himself in a difficult situation, having the people clamoring for water and him not being able to mourn for his sister. The people are afraid for their welfare since water is in short supply in the desert. From here comes the midrash about Miriam and her wells. If the people were concerned about water after her death, then she must have known where the water was to be found, but without her there would be no water. In verse 7 Moses and Aaron decide to consult God and get the following response:

וַיִּדְבֹר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: חַק אֶת-הַמָּטֶה וְהִקְהַל אֶת-הָעֵדָה אֹתָהּ וְאַהֲרֹן אָחִיךָ וְדַבַּרְתֶּם אֶל-הַסֵּלַע לְעֵינֵיהֶם וְנָתַן מִמִּיּוֹ וְהוֹצֵאתָ לָהֶם מַיִם מִן-הַסֵּלַע

And God said to Moses saying: Take the staff and gather all of the community, you and Aaron your brother, and you will speak to the rock before them and it will give its water to go forth to them, water from the rock.

Moses has received very clear instructions as to how to provide water for the people. Take the staff, speak to the rock, and water will flow. But what happens? Moses, unable to mourn for his beloved sister lashes out at the people in verses 9 - 11:

וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת-הַמָּטֶה מִלִּפְנֵי ה' כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּהוּ: וַיִּקְהֵלוּ מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן אֶת-הַקְּהָל אֶל-פְּנֵי הַסֵּלַע וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם שְׁמַעוּ-נָא הַמְרִים הַמִּן-הַסֵּלַע הַזֶּה נוֹצֵיא לָכֶם מַיִם: וַיִּרָם מֹשֶׁה אֶת-יָדוֹ וַיִּךְ אֶת-הַסֵּלַע בְּמַטְהוֹ פַּעַמַיִם וַיֵּצְאוּ מַיִם רַבִּים וַתִּשְׁתְּ הָעֵדָה וּבְעִירָם

And so Moses took the staff from before God as he was commanded. And Moses and Aaron gathered the community before the rock and said to them, “Listen up you rebels, from this rock are we to bring forth water?” And Moses raised up his hand and struck the rock, with his staff, two times. And much water flowed forth and the people and their cattle drank.

These few verses are full of important events and words. The most significant word, as taught by Rabbi Norman Cohen, is the word הַמְרִים, rebels. There are many words for rebels that

Moses could have chosen, **קושר** and **מרד**, **תקומם**, . But instead he chose a word with the root **מרה**, a word which appears nowhere else in the Torah, only in the other books of the Tanach. The most significant choice of this word is that it is also the spelling of the name of Miriam, Moses' sister who has just died. It is almost as if his anger at her for dying and leaving him without the secret of the wells has "welled" up in him as the people clamor for the water that she used to find. But that is midrash.

The equally important part of this event is that Moses specifically disobeyed God's command, and right before the entire community of Israel. He was told to speak to the rock, but instead he struck the rock, twice. Midrash holds that the first time he struck the rock nothing happened and he had an opportunity to follow God's instructions. However, in his rage and sorrow, he simply struck again and perhaps God, in a moment of compassion for his conflicted emotions, caused the waters to flow from the rock anyway. In the end, though, it was this public snubbing of God that would cause Moses to be denied entry into the Promised Land.

Midrash Tanhuma, in its commentary on this text, puts a more positive spin on this turn of events. It discusses the image of Moses taking 600,000 Israelites out of Egypt but not bringing them into the Promised Land. Instead he arrives with a whole new people.

לכן לא תביאו: אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה: משה, באיזה פנים אתה מבקש לבוא לארץ? משל למה הדבר דומה? לרועה אחד שיצא לרעות צאנו של מלך, ונשבית הצאן. בקש הרועה ליכנס לפלטרין של מלך. אמר לו המלך: יאמרו שאתה השבית הצאן. אף כך אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה: שבחך הוא שהוצאת שישים ריבוא וקברתם במדבר, ואתה מכניס דור אחר. עכשיו יאמרו: אין למתי המדבר חלק לעולם הבא, אלא תהיה בצרן ותבוא עימהם, שנאמר: ויתא ראשי עם וגו' (דב' לג כא). לכך נאמר: לא תביאו את הקהל הזה, שיצא עמך:

Therefore you will not bring. . God said to Moses: "Moses, in what appearance do you want to enter into the Land?" This can be compared to what example? To a shepherd who went to tend his flock of the King, and the flock was taken (stolen). The shepherd asked to enter into the palace of the King. The King said to him: "It is said that you took the flock." Because of this, the Holy One Blessed be He said to Moses, "It is to your praise that you brought out 600,000 and buried them in the desert. And you are bringing in another generation. Now they will say, "The ones who died in the desert

have no place in the World to Come. Rather, be their strength and come with them (into the World to Come). As it says: He came at the head of a people, etc (Deu 33:21). Therefore it is said, “You will not bring this people, that went out with you.”

Perhaps even this test which Moses seems to have failed was not a complete failure. The staff becomes a catalyst for a greater cause, but still not a magic wand.

Balaam has a stick, too. – Numbers 22:27

וַתֵּרֶא הָאֲתוֹן אֶת־מַלְאֲכֵי ה' וַתִּרְבֹּץ תַּחַת בְּלִעַם וַיַּחֲרֹאֲף בְּלִעַם וַיִּךְ אֶת־הָאֲתוֹן בַּמַּקֵּל:

And the donkey saw the angel of God and she lay down under Balaam. And Balaam became angry and he struck the donkey with his staff.

Once again, the *makeil* is a simple rod or staff used simply to beat a poor defenseless animal.

The *mateh* returns as the tribal designation – Numbers 26, 31, 34, and 36

For the balance of the book of Numbers, we find the *mateh* to be the designator of the tribes under discussion. The subjects at hand are the division of the Promised Land, after the Israelites enter. Which tribes will live where is enumerated. In chapter 36, the usage is the same but the discussion is the infamous petition by the daughters of Tzelofachad who, as women without brothers, want the right to inherit and maintain possession of the tribal assets.

A different perspective on מִטָּה, Mounts Gerizim and Ebal– Deuteronomy 27 and

28

The setting for this occurrence is the blessings and curses on Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal.

The tribes are to split between the two different mountain peaks and the priests and Levites would stand in the valley between the two mounts and remind the people of the blessings and

curse that would befall them if they did or did not follow the “contract” with God. What is interesting to note here is that this usage is based on a less frequent usage of the root נטה in the Torah, that being to bend or pervert. It comes in the curse in 27:19 about one who perverts justice. It appears in other conjugations in the Torah, but not in this one. This meaning is used more frequently in the Prophets and Writings, which might make sense due to the consensus that Deuteronomy is probably of later origin than the first four books of the Torah.

And again in 28:43, we find another variant meaning of the word מָטָה. Here it is used with another meaning, to be lower. וְאִתָּהּ תֵּיָרֵד מָטָה מָטָה, and you will go lower and lower. The vowelings give away the different construction and meaning.

The Prophets

Census again please – Joshua 13-22

The book of Joshua spends a great deal of time spanning chapters 13 through 22 describing the genealogies and borders of the various tribes of the Israelites after they had entered the land.

The basic *shevet* and *mateh* are, again, used interchangeably for tribal references and delineation.

The staff of authority – Judges 5:14

After Deborah and Barack had defeated Sisera, the tribes all gathered to pay tribute.

וּמִזְבוּלָן מִשְׁכֵּימָה בְּשִׁבְטֵי סִפֹּר:

And from Zebulun came forth with a staff the king's representative

Even angels carry a staff, (but whose staff is it really?) – Judges 6:21

As is the regular cycle of events in the Book of Judges, the Israelites did that which was offensive to God, they were punished, and then a new leader arose to make everything right again. Here we see Gideon being pressed into service. An angel appears to him, he offers food, and the angel tells him to put the sustenance on a rock.

וַיִּשְׁלַח מַלְאָךְ ה' אֶת־קֶצֶה הַמִּשְׁעָנָה אֲשֶׁר בְּיָדוֹ וַיַּגַּע בַּבָּשָׂר וּבַמִּצּוֹת וַתֵּעַל הָאֵשׁ מִן־הַצּוּר
וַתֹּאכַל אֶת־הַבָּשָׂר וְאֶת־הַמִּצּוֹת וּמִלְאָךְ ה' הָלַךְ מֵעֵינָיו:
And the angel of God stretched out the end of his cane, that was in his hand.
And he touched the meat and the unleavened bread, and the fire rose from the
rock and consumed the meat and the unleavened bread, and the angel of God
went out of his sight.

And here, in one of its rare occurrences, we have the *mish'an*, God's cane. This is one of the very few occurrences of this word, *mish'an*. Once again, it seems that it is still God's cane. Although the story presents an angel of God as confronting Gideon, in verse 14, we read, 'וַיִּפֹּן ה' אֵלָי, and God turned to him. It seems that God is the true bearer, once again, of the *mish'an*.

The forerunner of the taster spoon - 1 Samuel 14

In the confrontation between Jonathan and Saul, over eating or not eating before a battle with the Philistines, Jonathan unknowingly defied his father's order and tasted of available honey. He used a *mateh* to eat. It would appear that it was nothing more than a simple wooden stick that could be dipped into the honey for tasting purposes.

The cane as a weapon – 1 Samuel 17

When David goes out to meet Goliath he carries two things:

וַיִּקַּח מִקְלוֹ בְּיָדוֹ וַיִּבְחַר־לוֹ חֲמֹשֶׁה חֲלָקִי אֲבָנִים | מִן־הַנַּחַל

And he took his rod in his hand, and he selected for himself five stones from the river.

Saul has offered him armor but David has refused since it doesn't fit him and he is uncomfortable in it. He selects the stones for his sling but the staff that he brings is *מַקְלוֹ*, just a stick. There is no tribal authority associated with the *makel* as there is with the *shevet* or *mateh*. According to the BDB, the *makel* is imbued with a different kind of power, the visionary power of a prophet. It is carried by diviners and seers, such as Balaam in Numbers 22. It has a different kind of power, as used by Jacob in selectively improving his flock at the expense of Laban. It is even the staff of a traveller, such as the Israelites on the evening before the Exodus from Egypt. So, in a way, we find David not carrying a symbol of tribal or political authority, per se. Instead, we find him entering this combat armed with a physical weapon and a weapon that utilizes the revealed spiritual power of the prophet, on his way to his destiny as the great David, the King of Israel, but here armed with five stones and a stick.

Staff of God or man - 2 Samuel 7:14

In God's instructions to Nathan about telling David that he will not be the one to build God's house in Jerusalem there is an interesting turn of phrase. In Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush there is the reference to *מַטֵּה הָאֱלֹהִים*, the staff of God. This is the staff that Moses will use to work the signs and wonders before Egypt. Here, in 2 Samuel, there is a reference to possible punishment, *וְהִכַּחְתִּיו בְּשֵׁבֶט אַנְשִׁים*, with the staff of men. It would seem that the heir of David, who is to build the Temple for God in Jerusalem, will still be subject to some form of Divine wrath for mistakes, just not as serious as the signs and wonders that were

manifested in Egypt. One could conjecture that the longer *mateh* carries more “weight” than the simple *shevet*.

A magic wand only works in the hands of the right person – 2 Kings 4:31

We find ourselves in the middle of the miracles worked by Elisha. The woman’s child has seemingly died and she has summoned Elisha to heal him. Elisha sends his servant, Gehazi, ahead to prepare the child for Elisha’s arrival.

וַיֹּאמֶר לְגִיחָזִי חַגֹּר מְתֵנִיךָ וְקַח מִשְׁעֶנְתִּי בְיָדְךָ וְלֵךְ. . . וְשָׂמֶתָ מִשְׁעֶנְתִּי עַל-פְּנֵי הַנְּעָר:

And he said to Gehazi: “Gird you loins and take my cane in your hand and go. . . and put my cane on the face of the young lad.

And then in verse 31 we read:

וַגִּחָזִי עָבַר לִפְנֵיהֶם וַיִּשֶׂם אֶת-הַמִּשְׁעָנָה עַל-פְּנֵי הַנְּעָר

And Gehazi passed before them and put the cane on the face of the young lad. (Note that the staff here is one of the few occasions where the *mish’an* appears.)

What happens next is open to a variety of midrashic interpretations.

וַיַּעַל וַיִּשְׁכַּב עַל-הַיֶּלֶד וַיִּשָּׂם פִּי עַל-פִּי וְעֵינָיו עַל-עֵינָיו וְכַפָּיו עַל-כַּפָּו [כַּפָּיו] וַיִּגְהַר עָלָיו וַיִּחַם בְּבָשָׂר הַיֶּלֶד:

And he went up and he lay on the child and he put his mouth on his mouth and his eyes on his eyes, and his hands on his hands, and he crouched on him and the boy’s flesh warmed.

I would offer a midrashic interpretation as follows. When Elisha went in to see the dead boy, in verse 33, he closed the door and prayed to God. It might be that it was not Elisha, but God, who crouched upon the boy and gave him life. This image of mouth to mouth and eye to eye is

very reminiscent of the image of God breathing life into the earthling in Genesis 2:7 and also of the midrashic way that God took Moses' life in Deuteronomy 34:5:

וַיָּמָת שָׁם מֹשֶׁה עֶבְד־ה' בְּאֶרֶץ מוֹאָב עַל-פִּי ה':

And Moses died there, the servant of God, and the land of Moab, by the mouth of God.

Usually the last words are translated “by the command of God.” The more literal/*peshat* translation supports the midrash nicely. So here we might have Elisha praying to God and, just as the angel of Gideon was replaced by God, so also, maybe Elisha was replaced by the one who rightfully carries the *mish'an* and the one who truly gives life and death, God.

The infamous foretelling of Jesus – Isaiah 11:1 (not really)

Isaiah 11:1 is one of the two references to the word *choter*.

וַיֵּצֵא חֹטֶר מִגֹּזַע יֵשׁוּ וַיִּנְצֹר מִשָּׁרְשָׁיו יִפְרֶה

And a shoot shall go out from the stock of Jesse, and a sprout from this fruitful root.

Although Christians use this text, out of context, to presage the coming of the Christ, the general consensus is that proto-Isaiah was writing this, as we will see in verse 11, as consolation for those already taken captive by the Assyrians. Their vision was much shorter in time span and much more local in concept. Isaiah used the agricultural imagery of root stock to convey the expected lineage of their hoped for savior. It is messianic in intent, but it is just a different understanding of the word messiah. Here the messiah was, indeed, a redeemer, just not the ultimate christ-like redeemer. It was someone who was going to either release those under the

thumb of a proximate tyrant or redeem them and repatriate them to their homeland, the Promised Land. The time frame is simply much more immediate and less global and eternal.

Thy rod and staff, neither being the *mish'an* – proto-Isaiah

The prophet speaks of the pending destruction or doom of the Israelite people. Very often, as in verses 9:4, 10:5, 10:15, 10:24, 28:27, we find references to a pairing of *shevet* and *mateh*. It almost seems as if the prophet wants to “cover all bases.” In 10:5 we read:

הוֹי אַשּׁוּר שֶׁבֶט אָפִי וּמִטָּה־הוּא בְיָדָם זַעֲמִי

Behold, Asshur, the rod of my anger and the staff that is their hand, is indignation.

These two primary symbols of authority both come into usage to ensure that we understand the authority of the wielder of both of these items. If there is any confusion about the meaning of either word, the parallelism removes the confusion.

A more metaphysical rod – Isaiah 11:4

וְהִכָּה־אֶרֶץ בְּשֶׁבֶט פִּי וּבְרוּחַ שְׁפָתָיו יָמִית רָשָׁע:

And He will smite the land with the rod of his mouth and with the breath of His lips he will kill the evil ones.

Here we have an interesting use of the *shevet*. This crosses the boundaries of physical and meta-physical. It seems to be based on God’s ability to effect physical impact with words and speech. Only God would have the ability to do this.

The almond tree of Jeremiah – 1:11

The prophet uses a similar image as that of the staff of Aaron during the rebellion of Korach. However, Aaron's staff is a *mateh*, as befits his position of authority. Here in Jeremiah we find a different almond tree.

וַיְהִי דְבַר-ה' אֵלַי לֵאמֹר מִה-אֲתָה רֹאֶה יְרֵמְיָהוּ וְאָמַר מִקֵּל שֶׁקֵּד אֲנִי רֹאֶה:

And it was that the word of God came to me saying: "What do you see, Jeremiah?" And I said: "An almond branch is what I see."

The almond is the same image, but the purpose is different. The *makeil* is the plant shoot that represents the people of Israel. They are the growing shoot that is about to be cut down. The *mateh* of Aaron will not be cut down. This contrast becomes even more obvious in 48:17. God tells Jeremiah to see the destruction of Moab as a harbinger of Israel's fate.

אָמְרוּ אֵיכָה נִשְׁבַּר מִטֵּה-עַז מִקֵּל תִּפְאָרָה

Say, how is the staff of might broken, the staff of beauty?

Here in one sentence we find the clearest distinction between the *mateh* and the *makeil*. One is the staff of power, the elite, and one is the staff of beauty, the possible image of the people. These two different words cover a broad spectrum ranging from the high to the low, symbolizing the complete devastation that has been inflicted on Moab and is soon to be inflicted on Israel. In the English, one runs the risk of losing the breadth of the significance when the same word is used twice.

The rod and staff of doom – Ezekiel 7

Chapter 7 begins with a simple and blunt declaration: Doom! In verses 10 and 11 we find the word *mateh* used twice. וְצֶץ הַמִּטָּה פָּרַח הַזִּדְדוֹן, the rod has blossomed, insolence has flourished,

and then, *הַחֶמֶס קָם לְמִטָּה־רָשָׁע*, violence has risen into a rod of evil. Here, there is no question that the rod is the rod of corrupted power, not one of prophetic vision.

The lamentation over the pending fall of Jerusalem – Ezekiel 19 – 21

Late in chapter 19, Jerusalem is portrayed as a vine in a vineyard that has been destroyed. The appropriate word to use could have been the *makeh* of the simple rods or trees, as in the story of Jacob. However, that would not be appropriate here since these are rods of authority or power and, therefore, the word used is *mateh*. In 19:11-14 we read:

וַיְהִי־לָהּ מִטּוֹת עֵז אֶל־שִׁבְטֵי מַשְׁלִים וַתִּגְבֶּה קוֹמְתּוֹ עַל־בֵּין עֲבֹתִים וַיֵּרָא בְּגִבּוֹהּ בְּרֹב דְּלִיתָיו: וַתִּתֵּשׁ בְּחִמָּה לְאַרְצָהּ הַשְּׁלֵכָה וְרוּחַ הַקְּדִים הוֹבִישׁ פְּרִיָּהּ הַתִּפְרְקוּ וַיִּבְשׂוּ מִטָּה עֵזָה אֲשֶׁר אֲכָלְתָּהּ: וְעַתָּה שְׁתוּלָה בַּמִּדְבָּר בְּאַרְץ צִיָּה וְצִמָּא: וַתֵּצֵא אֲשֶׁר מִמִּטָּה בְּדִיהָ פְּרִיָּהּ אֲכָלָה וְלֹא־הָיָה בָּהּ מִטָּה־עֵז שִׁבְט לְמִשׁוֹל. . .

And she had mighty rods as rulers' scepters, and she was exalted among the highest foliage, and she was seen among the highest branches. She was uprooted in fury. She was cast to the ground. The east wind dried up her fruit. Her rods of strength were broken and withered. Fire consumed her. And now she has been transplanted to the desert, a land dry and parched. And now fire has gone out from the rod of her rods, her fruit has been eaten, and there is no longer in her scepter of might, the rulers' scepter. . .

One phrase of interest is *וַתֵּצֵא אֲשֶׁר מִמִּטָּה בְּדִיהָ*. Here we find another word for rod, *בד*. This identifies the rods that were used to carry the Ark of the Covenant. It does not carry the same status of might and power, but its juxtaposition against the *מִטָּה* is noteworthy. It could denote a reduction in status from control to subservience.

This is also one of the rare usages of this word outside of the Torah. Ezekiel uses it twice as branches and Job, Hosea, and Isaiah use it sparingly to indicate bars as in a gate or bones in a dead body. These are significantly different from the rods that carry the holy objects in the Torah.

Ezekiel 21:11 begins a dramatically vivid image of the pending fall of Jerusalem. Verses 11-18

read as follows:

יא ואתה בן־אדם האנח בשברון מתנים ובמרירות תאנח לעיניהם: יב והיה כִּי־יאמרו אליך על־מה אתה נאנח ואמרת אל־שמועה כִּי־באה ונמס כל־לב ורפו כל־ידיים וכהתה כל־רוח וכל־ברכים תלכנה מים הנה באה ונהיתה נאם אדני ה': יג ויהי דבר־ה' אלי לאמר: יד בן־אדם הנבא ואמרת כה אמר אדני אמר חרב חרב הוחדה וגם־מרוטה: טו למען טבח טבח הוחדה למען־היה־לה ברק מרטה או נשיש שבט בני מאסת כל־עץ: טז ויתן אתה למרטה לתפש בכף היא הוחדה חרב והיא מרטה לתת אותה ביד־הורג: יז זעק והילל בן־אדם כִּי־היא היתה בעמי היא בכל־נשיאי ישראל מגורי אל־חרב היו את־עמי לכן ספק אל־יִרָה: יח כי בחן ומה אם־גם־שבט מאסת לא יהיה נאם אדני ה':

And now, son of man, sigh with the breaking of loins and sigh with bitterness before their eyes. And it will be said to you, "About what do you sigh?" And you will say, regarding what you have heard, that came, and all hearts will despair, and all hands will fall, and every spirit will fade, and every knee will become water, behold it comes and it will be the utterance of the Almighty God. And it was the word of God to me that said: Son of man, prophesy and say, "thus says God, saying: a sword, a sword is sharpened and polished. It is sharpened for slaughter, it is polished so that it may be like lightening to you. Or if perchance we rejoice, the staff of my son it rejects, every stick(staff?). It has been given a polish, to be grasped in the hand. The sword has been sharpened, it has been polished to be put in the hand of a slayer. Cry out and wail, son of man, because this will happen to My people, all the chieftans of Israel. My people will be cast before the sword. Therefore strike the thigh (mourn, grieve?) Because it has been tested. And what if even the staff is rejected, it will no longer be." Thus says the Almighty God.

This is such a powerful piece of pre-exilic text. It describes a sword, usually the image for the hand of God acting through an over powering nation, being used to subjugate the Israelite people. Even the *shevet*, the symbol of the tribes or authority of the people, will not withstand the onslaught. It will be rejected or destroyed.

The prophetic staff of Hosea – Hosea 4:11

The 8th century BCE prophet Hosea prophesied during a period of relative calm, preceding the years leading up to destruction of Israel, the sacking of Jerusalem, and the Babylonian exile. His was a seer's wand, also like that of Balaam.

עמי בעצו ישאל ומקלו יגיד לו כי רוח זנונים התעה וזנו מתחת אלהיהם:

My people ask of the “wood” and their staff tells them that the spirit of harlotry has caused them to prostitute themselves from under God.

The seer uses the tool of the diviner to warn of the impending fate that awaits them. It is not a place for a weapon, but instead an opportunity to see what is coming.

More rods and staffs – Micah

In 4:14, the prophet Micah uses the standard *shevet* as an implement of punishment. However, in 6:9 there is an odd image of the *mateh*.

שמעו מטָה ומי יַעֲדָהּ:

Hear you the rod and the One who appointed it.

The idea of hearing the rod is similar to the event at Sinai. In Exodus 20:15, “The people saw the thunder and the lightning, the blare of the horn and the mountain smoking. . . “ When one hears what is seeable and sees what is hearable, then it is pretty certain that something out of the ordinary is happening. This rod of Micah is different, in some way, from the *matot* that we have been surveying up until now.

And now for something completely different – Habbakkuk 3:9&14

This chapter of Habbakkuk may or may not be properly attached to the first two chapters of the book. They are the prayer of Habbakkuk for God’s restoration of the people to their proper place. However, in verse 9 there is an enigmatic occurrence of *matot*.

עֲרִיהַ תַּעֲוֹר קִשְׁתְּךָ שְׂבָעוֹת מַטּוֹת אָמַר סְלָה:

Your naked bow is raised up, the rods of vows speak, Selah.

It is possible that this is another one of the occurrences of the physical and the meta-physical comprising a complete spectrum of Divine intervention. The bow is the physical weapon and the vows or words of God are the meta-physical. God's presence will be manifest across the entire spectrum of existence.

In verse 14 we find one of the rare occasions where the *mateh* is used as an actual weapon and not just an implement of punishment.

נִקְרַבְתָּ בְּמַטְיֵי רֹאשׁ פְּרָזוֹ

You crack his skull with his bludgeon. (The New JPS Tanakh)

In this case the interpreter takes a completely new and novel approach to the translation of the *mateh*. Blunt and succinct. The bludgeoning is even done with his own rod, the ultimate in humiliation.

The return from exile – Zechariah

The first eight chapters of Zechariah are generally considered to stand on their own, as his prophesy of good times that will be had in the return to Jerusalem, under the reign of Darius I. We find a simple reference in 8:4 that old men and women will sit in the streets of Jerusalem, וְאִישׁ מְשַׁעֲנֵתוֹ בְּיָדוֹ, and each will have his cane in his hand. A simple support for the older and infirm.

However, in chapter 11, we get a much more enigmatic appearance of rod and staff. The second half of the book, chapters 9-14, seem disconnected from the first eight chapters. They return to the doom predicting that we expect from the prophets. The downfall of Israel's

neighbors is predicted and the mightiness of God is re-affirmed. But in chapter 11, God seems to set havoc loose in the land, with all men at the mercy of other men. The prophet, presumed to be Zechariah, sets himself as the shepherd to try and save the people. He “arms” himself with שְׁנֵי מַקְלוֹת לְאַחַד קָרָאתִי נָעַם וּלְאַחַד קָרָאתִי חֶבְלִים, two staffs, one called delightfulness/pleasantness and the other called union/binding/pledge. It is important to note that the staffs are *maklot*, the prophetic rods, not rods of power and might. The image continues with God’s dissatisfaction with the strife in their midst and the first staff is broken, symbolizing the beginning of the fracturing of the relationship between the Shepherd and his flock. It is interesting to note, that the reverse image is usually used when something is cut in half. It is a sign of a treaty when an animal is cut in half and the treaty signers pass between the halves. Here, the broken staff is the sign of the end of the treaty. Broken instead of cut?

The prophet is then paid his thirty shekels of silver, the sum that a gored slave is worth (Exodus 21:32), a standard paltry sum. After this, the second staff is broken, symbolizing the rift between North and South. The chapter finishes with a prognostication of destruction and havoc in the land. The key item here is the use of the *makel*, the tool of the seer or prophet, not the symbol of power or authority.

A tool for punishment – Proverbs

Throughout the book of Proverbs we find the rod as a disciplinary tool and, in most cases, we find the *shevet* is the authoritarian tool employed. However, as mentioned above, in 14:3 we find the second mention in the bible of the *choter*.

בְּפִי־אֵוִיל חֹטֵר גְּאוּהָ וְשִׁפְתֵי חֲכָמִים תִּשְׁמְרוּם:

In the mouth of the foolish is a rod of pride, and the lips of the wise keep them.
The variety of translations and interpretations for this verse is surprisingly large. In many cases there are homonymic mistranslations of the word *ga'avah* as relating to the back instead of pride. But it seems that this is really another example of the power of words and their ability to hurt or do damage. It is reminiscent of the old story about the student who spreads evil words about everyone and then wants to take them back. The rabbi tells him to take a pillow and scatter the feathers in the town square. Then he tells the student to go and gather all of the feathers. Needless to say, the student finds that he is unable to retrieve all of the feathers. So it is with words. This rod/switch could be an example of the abuse of words and the punishment that often follows their misuse.

Even the music sets this rod apart – Lamentations 3:1

אָנִי הַגֹּבֵר רָאָה עֵינֵי בְּשִׁבְטֵי עֲבָרָתוֹ:

I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of His wrath.

When one reaches this point in the book of Lamentations, even the mode of cantillation changes at this point, perhaps to emphasize the importance of this rod of wrath.

The rod and staff in midrash

And Abraham smashed all of the idols in his father's idol shop. The next morning, when his father asked him what had happened, he replied that the idols had all gotten into a fight and smashed each other. His father replied that he should know that idols can't fight with each other, to which Abraham replied, "You see!!!" And thus was born monotheism.

Many children are told this story and then they are surprised that it is not in the Torah but, instead, it is midrashic in origin. We often have a tendency to use midrashic imagery to support our interpretations of the text, and I am one who loves midrashic superimposition on top the *peshat*, or simple text. This is also the case with Moses' staff. We will find midrashim that talk about it being made of blue sapphire, about it being passed down from God to Adam and down through the patriarchs and ultimately to Moses, and about it being planted in Yitro's garden and Moses removing it like Arthur's sword in the stone.

At this different time, we find a whole new set of midrashim being created in the world of Jewish thought. These midrashim are emerging, accompanied by new interpretive thought in the worlds of Islam, in the East, and the lands of Europe as they re-emerge from the Dark Ages of a few hundred years before. There is cross pollination of ideas as the great thinkers of each world begin to take new looks at the old texts.

Moses' Staff in Pirkei de Rebbe Eliezer

We begin with an 8th century midrashic commentary, the Pirkei de Rebbe Eliezer.

Rabbi Levi said: That rod which was created in the twilight was delivered to the first man out of the Garden of Eden. Adam delivered it to Enoch, and Enoch delivered it to Noah, and Noah [handed it on] to Shem. Shem passed it on to Abraham, Abraham [transmitted it] to Isaac, and Isaac [gave it over] to Jacob, and Jacob brought it down into Egypt and passed it on to his son Joseph, and when Joseph died and they pillaged his household goods, it was placed in the palace of Pharaoh. And Jethro was one of the magicians of Egypt, and he saw the rod and the letters which were upon it, and he desired in his heart (to have it), and he took it and brought it, and planted it in the midst of the garden of his house. No one was able to approach it, any more.

When Moses came to his house he went into the garden of Jethro's house, and saw the rod and read the letters which were upon it, and he put forth his hand and took it. Jethro watched Moses, and said: "This one in the future will redeem Israel from Egypt." Therefore he gave him Zipporah his daughter to wife, as it is said, "And Moses was content to dwell with the man; and he gave Moses Zipporah, his daughter" (Ex. 2. 21).

The later Book of Jasher further embellished the midrash of Rebbe Eliezer. It is theorized that it dates back to 11th or 12th century editors under the influence of the growing world of Islam, but it is still a source for midrashic interpretations, especially when it is compared to other parallel midrashic sources. In chapter 77, we have a similar recounting of the history of the staff that Moses brought to the burning bush. The lineage is slightly different but without significant differences.

In 77:26 we find Moses in a dungeon in the house of Reuel/Yitro. Zipporah has been feeding him for the ten years of his imprisonment and she reminds her father of the greatness of the God of Abraham and the importance of Moses in the chain of events in history. Consequently, just the way Joseph was brought out of prison to interpret Pharaoh's dreams, Moses was brought out of the dungeon to serve Reuel/Yitro.

Then Pharaoh sent and called Joseph, and they brought him hastily out of the dungeon. And he shaved himself, and changed his raiment, and came in unto Pharaoh. (Gen 41:14)

And Reuel commanded Moses to be brought out of the dungeon, so they shaved him and he changed his prison garments and he ate bread. (Bk of Jasher 77:37)

This seems to be the protocol for someone's redemption from prison. In the case of Moses, however, after his release he goes into the garden of Reuel to pray to God and beholds. . .

77:39-42 “a sapphire stick was placed in the ground, which was planted in the midst of the garden. And he approached the stick and he looked, and behold the name of the Lord God of hosts was engraved thereon, written and developed upon the stick. And he read it and stretched forth his hand and he plucked it like a forest tree from the thicket, and the stick was in his hand. And this is the stick with which all the works of our God were performed, after He had created Heaven and Earth, and all the host of them, seas, rivers, and all their fishes.

77:49 continues And all the mighty men of the Kinities tried to pluck it when they endeavored to get Zipporah his daughter, but they were_unsuccessful. So that stick remained planted in the garden of Reuel (Yitro), until he came who had a right to it and took it. And when Reuel saw the stick in the hand of Moses, he wondered at it, and he gave him his daughter Zipporah for a wife.

In this version we find a kind of sword in the stone image that we have not seen before. The planted sacred item is used to select the leader for the trials and tribulations to follow. This is a concept that does not seem to appear in earlier literature.

Moses’ Staff in Midrash Vayosha

Midrash Vayosha, another medieval commentary, tells a similar story but with a few differences. The major addition is that the stick, when planted in the ground in Reuel’s garden, blossomed into an almond tree. This draws on the image of the staff of Aaron blossoming into an almond tree during the rebellion of Korach and his clan in Numbers 17.

The story is told, by Moses, in flashback format.

When I went out from Egypt, I was 40, and I was standing by the well and I found Zipporah, daughter of Yitro and I saw her, and she was most modest. I said to her that I would marry her. And she told me of the custom of her father and she said to me, every man that asked to wive the daughters of her father , my father tests him with one tree that he has in his garden. And when they arrive at the tree, immediately it swallows them. I said to her this tree, where is she from? Whereupon she said to me, the staff that HKBH used to create on erev Shabbat,

that he used to create his world, that he entrusted to the first person, and that Adam the first entrusted it to Enoch, and Enoch entrusted it to Noah, and Noah entrusted it to Shem, and Shem entrusted it to Avraham, and Avraham entrusted it to Isaac, and Isaac to Jacob, and Jacob went down to Egypt and entrusted it to Joseph his son, and Joseph died. The Egyptians ransacked his house and brought his staff to the palace of Pharaoh. And Yitro was one of the great magicians of Egypt and he saw the staff, and he desired it, and he stole it and brought it to his house. And on the staff were engraved the ineffable name and on it ten plagues that HKBH brought to the Egyptians were written on it. And it was written – acronym of 10 plagues. And it was several years that the staff stayed at the house of Yitro my father, until he came one time and took it in his hand and entered into the garden and planted it. And he returned to the garden to take it and found that it flowered. And it blossomed and it sprouted almonds. And it stayed there and it was examined by all who asked to wive one of his daughters.

The story continues with Zipporah telling her father about how Moses rescued her and her sisters from the shepherds at the well and Yitro asks to meet Moses. The story continues:

Since I returned to the house, I ate and I drank and I spoke to Yitro that he should give me Zipporah his daughter for a wife. And he answered me, “If you are able to bring me the staff standing in my garden, I will give her to you. And I went and I searched the garden and I found it. And I took it in my hand. Immediately Yitro relented and said, “In my time this is the man a prophet that all wise men of Israel foretold about him, that in the future a prophet will go out from Israel that in his hand will be the destruction of Egypt and all the Egyptians that are in it.

Oddly enough though, it is here in this version that, for some unknown reason, Midrash Vayosha reverses the order of events. Yitro now gets angry with Moses and puts him in the pit. Zipporah sustains him for many years and Moses is then redeemed from the pit, given Zipporah to marry and the saga continues.

The situation with all of these midrashim is that they date to much later times in Jewish history. They mostly appear in midrash dating only back to the late medieval periods of the 12th to 15th centuries, some, like the Pirkei de Rebbe Eliezer appear a little earlier. None of the original text

purports to impute this channeling of cosmic energy or selection. It is a possibility but one that further analysis of the text will dispute.

Similar legends in the East and the West.

Arthur and the Legend of the Sword in the Stone

It is interesting to compare the legend of Arthur and the Sword in the Stone with the midrashim that arose in the 8th through 12th centuries about the mystical roots and nature of the staff in Yitro's garden.

In his book, *The Discovery of King Arthur*, Geoffrey Ashe recounts much of the mythology surrounding King Arthur and the legends of his life. His work was based upon the writings of a historian, Geoffrey of Monmouth, who lived in the first half of the 12th century. Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote a very comprehensive history of the life of Arthur, but it did not include the mystical story of the Sword in the Stone. Richard Cavendish, in his book, *King Arthur and The Grail*, also recognizes this missing aspect of Geoffrey of Monmouth's work. It is only in the later 15th century work, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, that Sir Thomas Malory tells a version including the Sword in the Stone. It is an odd coincidence that this later concept of a magical decider of a future leader's fate enters into the "mythology." Whether it is the sword planted in the stone or the staff planted in the garden, this image only arises in later works.

The Tales of the Arabian Nights

Another piece to throw into this pot of legends is the Tale of Arabian Nights called *The Talking Bird, the Singing Tree, and the Golden Water*. In this tale, we find several images and mythologies that are scattered throughout our history and mythology. The story begins with a new young Emperor, having assumed the throne after his father's death, traveling in the streets inognito. He hears three sisters wishing for wealth and status and he decides to grant them their wishes. One wished to be married to the Emperor's cook and one to the Emperor's baker and one to the Emperor himself. One can make a case that the cook and baker are similar exits from poverty and despair reminiscent of the steward and baker that facilitated Joseph's release from prison. The two sisters, very quickly, became jealous of their youngest sister and plotted against her. Their hatred for their sister being hidden, they secure the favor of the Emperor and become attendants to the young Queen and her soon-to-be born offspring.

We now find a familiar image. When the young prince is born to the queen, the jealous sisters place him in a basket and float him away down a canal running through the city. The similarities to Moses' early life are now obvious. As the baby in the basket floats down the river, the Emperor's chief gardener spots it, summons an underling who "reaches out" with a rake and plucks the baby from the river. Being childless, the chief gardener and his wife adopt the young boy. The sisters tell the Emperor that his queen had given birth to a puppy, arousing his anger against her. Apparently he was not too angry since soon thereafter, another prince was born to the Queen. The sisters set him afloat down the canal again, this time telling the

Emperor that she has given birth to a cat. Once again, the chief gardener finds the floating baby basket and adopts the second child.

Needless to say, a third child is born to the Queen, this time a girl. She suffers the same fate as her brothers and is floated down the canal, as well. We now have two brothers and a sister involved with floating baskets and rescue by attendants of a high ranking woman in the royal household. Granted Moses was the only one floated in the Nile, with Miriam and Aaron only being safely nearby, but the parallel is present. By now, the wrath of the Emperor is uncontrollable. The Queen is sentenced to a life of ignominy, shame, and public ridicule. Could this be compared to the slavery endured by Yocheved and her people?

The three children were raised in a life of comfort and they were accorded opportunities for education and self-betterment. The chief gardener built himself and his children an expansive country home, he then retired from the service of the Emperor and soon thereafter died, leaving his children in a comfortable station in life.

After a period of time, an old woman enters the scene and is welcomed into the house by the daughter and then the two sons. She admires the furnishings but suggest that the addition of three things would complete the household, a Talking Bird, a Singing Tree, and Golden Water. The old woman tells the daughter where to find these treasures. When the two brothers hear of this treasure, they decide to go in search of it. First the youngest brother goes, then the elder, and finally the sister. Needless to say, neither the first nor the second brothers are successful in retrieving the treasures. The Princess decides to take matters into her own hands. She travels the described journey, meets the same dervish that her brothers met and

embarks up the mountain to obtain the desired treasures. Unlike her brothers, she is clever enough to pass the traps along the way and she attains the mountain top and finds the Bird, Tree, and Water. The bird agrees to remain in her care, she fills a flagon with some of the Golden Water and then searches for the Singing Tree. When the bird indicates the direction of the Tree, the Princess finds that she is unable to uproot it to take it with her. The Bird tells her that all she needs is to break off a branch and root that in her garden. After being rooted, it will grow into a new Tree. Can this be compared to the staff/tree in Yitro's garden? The story continues with the ultimate reconciliation of the Emperor and his lost children and his Queen, as well. Can this relate to the earlier story of Joseph and his father and brothers being reunited and reconciled with Pharoah earlier in our stories?

In their book, *The Arabian Nights*, authors Wiggin and Smith indicate that the earliest manuscripts containing these stories date to the 15th century. To try and determine who might have been the original source of the sword/staff/branch pulling myth would seem to be impossible. The only thing that we can see is that this theme arose at a similar time in the literature of these different worlds.

The similarity between the part of the story of the Singing Tree and the midrash about Moses in Yitro's garden with the staff that had been passed down through generations is obvious. The Book of Yasher and Midrash Vayosha both tell variants of Moses' encounter with the staff/tree in Yitro/Reuel's garden. It has been rooted there, only to be taken out by one who is destined for greatness.

And so we find a sword in the stone type of myth in Celtic/Northern Europe legend, medieval Jewish mythology, and also stories from the Eastern world of Islam. What is it about this myth that pervades all of these three disparate worlds, that a rooted thing, a sword in a stone or a tree in the ground can only be removed by one worthy of wielding the weapon? The similarities between Arthur and Moses are striking. In each case, a young child (this is relatively early in Moses' life) of low or unknown birth is faced with an opportunity to pull from the ground a "selecting tool" with writing on it, one that no one else was able to obtain, and then rise to be a true uniter and leader of a down trodden and disorganized people.

In conclusion

We read in Exodus 3:20:

וְשַׁלַּחְתִּי אֶת־יָדִי וְהִצִּיתִי אֶת־מִצְרַיִם בְּכֹל נִפְלְאוֹתַי אֲשֶׁר אֶעֱשֶׂה בְּקִרְבּוֹ וְאַחֲרֵי־כֵן יִשְׁלַח אֶתְכֶם:

And I will put forth My hand, and smite Egypt with all My wonders which I will do in the midst thereof. And after that he will let you go.

It is not the hand or rod of Moses or Aaron that inflicts the plagues on Egypt. It is the hand of God. And it is not the crook of a shepherd or the cane that we buy at the medical supply store that gets us through the challenging times. It is the internal support that we get from our faith and trust in God.

It all becomes more difficult to parse when one relies on the English. We use two words, rod and staff, where the Bible uses at least six. The *mateh*, *shevet*, *makel*, *mish'an*, *choren*, and *bad*, all have very different intentions that get lost when you try to use only two words in their place. Even to study in the *peshat*, the simple text, we need to rely on the original Hebrew text

to avoid the editorial imposition of translation. A rod is not necessarily a rod, nor is a staff simply a staff.

However, the one “rod” that seems to be set apart from the others is the *mish’an*. One could wonder why God would have a cane. Maybe we can find that since we are made in the Divine Image, that just as we need a cane now and then, maybe God needs one too, sometimes. It is the *mishan* that truly works God’s miracles of life and death. We see it in Elisha and the young boy, we see God wield it before Gideon, and we see it in the 23rd Psalm. Here God personally manifests Supernal “Power and Support” for us, and these words might even be a better translation of verse 4 than simply “rod and staff.” This is, in fact, the translation that is found in the Reconstructionist siddur, *Kol Hanishama*. The *mish’an* is the rod that really supports us when we need it. It is the cane that God leans on and it is the cane that we lean on. All the others are simply tools and symbols of power or authority.

Sforno sums it up relatively simply. In his commentary on Exodus 4:2, regarding God’s question to Moses as to the nature of the staff that Moses brought to the encounter at the burning bush, he writes:

הַנֵּה הַמַּטֵּה הוּא דָבָר שֶׁאֵין בוֹ רוּחַ חַיִּים, וְהַיָּד הִיא דָבָר שֶׁיֵּשׁ בוֹ רוּחַ חַיִּים, וְאֲנִי אֶמִית
וְאֶחֱיָהּ, כִּי אֶמִית הַיָּד בְּצָרְעַת, וְאֶתֵּן רוּחַ חַיִּים בַּמַּטֵּה הַמֵּת .

Behold the staff. It is a thing that has no life in it, while the hand is a thing that has life in it. I am the One who takes life and gives life. Because, I “kill” the hand with an affliction and I give the breath of life into the dead stick.

Sforno again posits that it is, indeed, God who has the power. It is not the rod or staff that is the source, but that the rod or staff is a physical reminder of God’s comforting presence in our world.

Just as God promised Moses at the burning bush that He would be with him in his confrontation with Pharaoh, כִּי־אֶהְיֶה עִמָּךְ “because I will be with you,” so also in the 23rd Psalm do we have the hope of a similar promise from God to us.

כִּי־אַתָּה עִמָּדִי שִׁבְטְךָ וּמִשְׁעַנְתְּךָ הֵמָּה יִנְחֵמֵנִי:

Because you are with me, your rod and your staff (cane) they comfort me.

The 23rd Psalm taps into that need for an awareness of God’s proximity, especially in times of duress. Maybe the various rods and staffs are not actually the true comfort we seek. They may broaden our physical base of support, but most of them only symbolize some form of power or authority. Even the plant based *makeil* taps into a mystical power from outside of our base. *But* we can know that when we are in the “the valley of the shadow of Death” and we need ultimate comfort and visceral support, God will loan us His meta-physical Cane, the true Staff of support, מִשְׁעַנְתּוֹ.

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