

The Magic and Stories of Shoresh



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The Magic and Stories of Shoresh

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The Power of Story

Stories and storytellers have a relationship. The story and the participants, when the teller is paying attention, let one know when and how the story needs telling. The stories here are (except when attributed otherwise) my own retellings; treat them like skeletons to be enfleshed or mannequins to be dressed by your own flourishes and your own words.

Stories of Shorashim

Let me tell you a story...There is a beautiful story about the 18th century Hasidic master, the Baal Shem Tov, retold here by storyteller Noa Baum, This reformulation of the classic story adds a universal aspect:

Story keeps hope in the world

“It is told that in every generation there are times when hope threatens to leave this world. At such times, the Baal Shem Tov, the great Jewish mystic, would go into a secret place in the forest. There he would light a special fire and say a holy prayer speaking the long-forgotten most sacred name of God. The danger was averted and hope stayed alive.

In later times when disaster threatened, the Maggid of Mezrich, his disciple, would go to the same place in the forest and say, “Ribono Shel Olam, Master of the Universe, I do not know how to light the fire, but I can say the prayer.”

Still later, his [the Maggid of Mezritch] disciple, Moshe Leib of Sasov, would go to the same place in the forest and say, “Ribono Shel Olam, Master of the Universe, I do not know how to light the fire or say the prayer, but I found my way to this place, and that must be enough.” And it was. Hope stayed alive.

And later when Israel of Rizhyn needed intervention from heaven, he sat in his chair with his head in his hands and said, “Ribono Shel Olam, Master of the Universe, I no longer know how to light the fire nor how to say the prayer, I can’t even find my way

to that place, but I can tell the story and that must be enough. ” And it was. And it still is. As long as stories are told, hope stays in the world.”¹

A Story is a narrative act with a beginning in which one meets the protagonist(s) and is introduced to the dilemma, a middle in which one travels through the means of solving (or not) this particular dilemma, and a resolution. There is no “end”. Every story continues beyond the bounds of its telling, the resolution allows the teller to stop the recitation. There is no ‘audience’ for a storyteller, because all who are witness to a telling are participants. To story is to paint a picture with words, expression, gesture, sound, cadences, and silences. It is to build a scene in the participants’ imagination and to escort the participants from the beginning to resolution. Oral and written teachings permeate Jewish ethos. Literacy in our stories, the laws and precepts, whether in oral or written form, is demanded from our tradition. From its inception, the Nation of Israel was mandated to prioritize teaching, learning and literacy in order to sustain itself. Story and narrative are essential and integral elements of this ethos.

Johanna Kuyvenhoven, author of *In the Presence of Each Other*, spent time studying storytelling in a classroom where the teacher employed storytelling in every aspect of teaching. “[Children in the classroom]... learned about being human in its states of triumph, despair, hilarity, and horror. Such storytelling events offered critical means to explore complex questions that were philosophical, ethical, psychological, political, religious, and ontological.”² Questions, participation, pictures drawn in air - with words, histories, rules, dreams, dances, cadence, pauses, words and always the story is the edifice that transmits the peoplehood showing everyone who they are. The classroom thrived on the “imaginating”³ germinated by the storytelling process.

¹ There are many versions of this story, most focus on the fate of the Jewish people; though the author of this sermon has expressed her own challenges with this story, this version is more appealing for me. “Lighting New Fires: Retelling the Story of the Baal Shem Tov – Kol Nidre | Congregation Kol Ami - Reform Temple in Elkins Park, PA Congregation Kol Ami,” September 24, 2023, <https://www.kolamielkinspark.org/sermons/lighting-new-fires-retelling-the-story-of-the-baal-shem-tov-kol-nidre/> (accessed on 12/20/2024).

² Kuyvenhoven, *In the Presence of Each Other*, 5.

³ Kuyvenhoven learns this word coined by one of the students (Layla) in the observed classroom. It means, according to this child, “an intense activity of deep imaginative engagement. During this time, not only did awareness of each other dissipate, so did the listeners’ awareness of self and the storyteller as a person or teacher. Children slid into a storyworld” (Kuyvenhoven, 53).

Storytelling in the classroom is not far removed from the ancient scene of the village elder gathering his disciples around a central area and retelling or enacting the tales of his people. “Storytelling is an inescapably human activity. It happens anywhere people are together, and classrooms are certainly rich gathering places of people. Stories bubble up through the whole school day. Children remember events, talk about goals scored, accidents, and video games they play. Teachers tell stories by-the-way and solicit children’s experiences in the many discussions that happen during the day.”⁴ Everyone has a story to tell, and sharing stories is a uniquely human activity. It is what we do in almost every social situation. We use story to share parts of ourselves, our history, our ambitions, our motivations. We use story to illustrate, to entertain, to be quintessentially human. “Part of the uniqueness of Storytelling is its amazing ability to stoke fires of imagination... The story will ignite creativity within your class without your dictating what you expect (your students) to gain from the experience.”⁵ Employing storytelling in the classroom will redefine the way students approach, understand, and internalize any subject matter. “Storytelling uses all the senses, because as the Storyteller you place yourself in the tale in order to experience it and make that experience real for others. It is only when you can truly relate to something that you begin to understand it”⁶ We have established segmented and compartmentalized systems for mainstream pedagogy; only in early childhood do we practice an integration of subject matters. As children grow into what is considered more advanced learning, the disciplines become more separate, more divided, and more specialized. When story is used in the classroom it can weave links to support and enhance every course of study. Story can enhance associations and build complementary bridges for students to reinforce, deepen and enrich education in all areas of learning.

If there is one universal thread that binds all people together, it's their need for stories, not in broken increments and not only as entertainment or as diversion from the world, but as an essential life force. Since the time we enter this world, we live in stories, inhaling and exhaling them. They are inherent in everything we do... Indeed, exchanging stories is our most basic and primitive instinct.⁷

⁴ Ibid., 21.

⁵ Davies, *Storytelling in the Classroom*, 48.

⁶ Ibid., 57.

⁷ Lipkin, *Bringing the Story Home*, 18.

Stories, and the language in which they are told, describe, define, and illustrate their culture. The stories told in a society mark that which is fundamental. When the stories are interpreted into a different language, there can be, or must be, something different in the understanding of the story. Words that have been translated (express the sense of [words or text] in another language⁸) cannot convey the nuances and subtleties in the efficient ways that are written in the original language, it can only deliver “a sense of the word”; one layer. The depth of meanings spoken in the original can require many more words to convey similar ideas, perhaps never coming closer than an approximation. Playing with the words, telling the stories about the words, finding a new facet might broaden and deepen an understanding of the Hebrew, and of the meanings within the texts.

Jewish educational traditions are often based on the culture of the Palestinian (Yerushalmi) and Babylonian (Bavli) Yeshivot, or study houses, of the early diasporic Rabbis. In these places the students and rabbis examined, investigated, analysed, interpreted, argued, and dissected scriptural texts.

Nathan the Babylonian describes the manner of answering responsa as follows: And this was their custom regarding responsa to questions: on each day of Adar he [the head of the academy] brings out to them all the questions which have arrived and gives them permission to respond. . . . Then each one speaks according to his understanding and wisdom, and they raise objections and solve them and discuss each matter . . . and analyze it thoroughly. And the head of the academy listens to their words and understands everything that they say and that they object one to another. Here the dialectic has a practical function, namely to answer the legal query through analysis of the different sides of the issue. The Talmudic sources suggest a more hypothetical exercise not necessarily related to practical law, but the procedure and terminology are identical.⁹

Jeffery Rubenstein, in *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud*, talks about the way stories are passed down, how a storyteller is inheriting a received tradition and makes it his own. Both

⁸ Dictionary.com definition of “translate.”

⁹ Rubenstein, *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud*, Ch. 8; 144.

the old and the new are preserved in each retelling. Rubenstein does not simply explain what was done in these yeshivot, he tells the stories of their procedures, their transformations of law, and their methods of coming to the conclusions (or not). In order for us to understand the work of the Talmudic masters, we read the stories, and the stories of their stories, and their explanations; these also, in story form.

We perpetuate our stories. We find our stories throughout the narratives of our foundational texts. In Judaism, we continue to build and extrapolate from these stories to create bonds with the past and with the future. Moshe Rabbeinu understood that in order to maintain the relationship with G*d¹⁰, there would be no better mechanism than through a direct, consistent transmission; through education, through play and wordplay, through storytelling. “And these words which I am commanding you, you shall place upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and you shall speak with them; when you are in your home, when you are walking upon the road, when you recline and when you arise...”¹¹ When Moshe uttered these words to the Nation of Israel he was not speaking only, or even primarily, to those standing before him, he was speaking to the next generation, to the generations after that. He was, indeed, speaking to us and to our future. He was laying out a doctrine and method for the preservation of a bond with G*d through our teachings, through our speech, through our stories. He enjoins us to play with all the words of the poetry that is Torah.

¹⁰ The names of G*d appear in a modified form to preserve the traditional honor reserved for the Name of G*d. The נ is in substitution of the Tetragrammaton and the title of the translation of the word G*d appears as אלקיינו, substituting the פ for the נ in the original text.

¹¹ Deuteronomy 6: 6-7, translation by author.

The Hebrew Language and root words

Unique among modern languages, modern Hebrew was re-formed. It was a language that had been relegated to prayer and study, religious and holy books. The language of the origin of Judaism is Hebrew. It is also called *לשון הקודש* *Lashon HaKodesh* (the Holy tongue). There was a period when Hebrew was forbidden to be used in a secular context¹² because of the perceived inherent holiness. It is now a vibrant, growing, and well used language, spoken in both Holy and secular contexts. Hebrew lends itself especially to linguistic play. Because of its nature as a root-based language, Hebrew's paucity of vocabulary creates a depth brought about by multiplicity of meaning, thereby bringing to light the interconnectivity of words, ideas, and play that might otherwise not be immediately appreciated. There is a multiplicity of meanings in words that allows us to play, to pun, and to delve deeply into concepts not immediately apparent.

“The history of the Hebrew language is usually divided into four major periods: Biblical, or Classical, Hebrew, until about the 3rd century BCE, in which most of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) is written; Mishnaic, or Rabbinic, Hebrew, the language of the Mishna (a collection of Jewish traditions), written about 200 CE...; Medieval Hebrew, from about the 6th to the 13th century CE, when many words were borrowed from Greek, Spanish, Arabic, and other languages; and Modern Hebrew, the language of Israel in modern times.”¹³ Hebrew has changed through history, even to the point of nearly disappearing as a spoken language, though never disappearing entirely. The consistent thread is, and has been, the consonantal root unit.

Hebrew is a root based language, it employs 2, 3, or (very rarely) 4 consonantal skeleton sets to form a unit of meaning which are then manipulated to create parts of speech. Prefixes, suffixes, diacritics,¹⁴ and linguistic constructs manipulate the root to convey the meanings of

¹²“Answer to ‘Is There a Mitzva to Speak Loshon Kodesh?’,” *Mi Yodeya*, January 12, 2012, <https://judaism.stackexchange.com/a/13290>; Gershon Gold, “Is There a Mitzva to Speak Loshon Kodesh?,” Forum post, *Mi Yodeya*, January 12, 2012, <https://judaism.stackexchange.com/q/13284>; n.d., <https://judaism.stackexchange.com/questions/13284/is-there-a-mitzva-to-speak-loshon-kodesh>.

¹³<https://www.britannica.com> Written and fact-checked by The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica
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¹⁴ “a sign, such as an accent or cedilla, which when written above or below a letter indicates a difference in pronunciation from the same letter when unmarked or differently marked” (Google dictionary);
These vowel soundings do not appear written in the sacred texts, but are transmitted through oral tradition, and lend meaning, grammar, and context to the ‘knowledge units’ that appear as shorashim.

texts. Thus the speaker, or user, is able to formulate syntactically grammatical sentences. Hebrew root units are conceptual rather than definitive. They do not constitute actual words; rather, they form the basis for word patterns that share common core meaning tendencies. One שׂוֹרֶשׁ *shoresh* (root unit) can be used to form a noun, adjective, verb and sometimes a prepositional form. The same *shoresh* can have many interpretations and layers of meaning, even diametrically opposing ones. Even the word *shoresh* itself is an example of this phenomenon. In Psalms 52:7 “G*d¹⁵ ... Will take you up and pluck you out of your tent ... Will *root you out* of the land of the living.” The word used here is *v'sheresh'cha* וּשְׁרֶשׁ . In this intensive grammatical form of the word, it indicates an uprooting or extracting, in the plain grammatical form of the word, *le'shoresh* לְשָׁרֶשׁ , It indicates a planting or underpinning.¹⁶

The root word נָחַם (N.KH. M) can be used to mean solace or comfort¹⁷ and it is also used to indicate regret or lament¹⁸. The *shoresh* for bread¹⁹, לְחֵם (L,Kh.M) is also the *shoresh* for war²⁰. The puns intrinsic to the roots of Hebrew words have lent themselves to be used in symbolic traditions. The traditional Sephardic Rosh HaShana “seder” uses this word-play in the names and symbolism of the foods. The root for “beet” (pun intended), סְלִיק (S.L.K.) is also the root word for throwing stones or chasing someone away. Among the lines read at this seder is: “May it be your will L*rd our G*d, G*d of our ancestors, that all your enemies and those who seek evil upon us יִסְתַּלְקֻנוּ (pronounced ‘yis’talku) be uprooted or chased away. We recite this as we enjoy a sweetened beet or beet-green (swiss chard) bite. We intentionally employ this root word and the symbolic food so that the pun will play in our minds and our mouths.

A single Hebrew root (*shoresh* שׂוֹרֶשׁ) can be interpreted to the equivalent with multiple English words. The familiar word שלום (*shalom*) is used as “hello, goodbye, peace”; the *shoresh*,

¹⁵ The Name of G*d is often changed in order to avoid inappropriate or incorrect use. In writing, the Name (lit; HaShem) is rendered in order to avoid inadvertent disrespect or destruction G*d's Name. This renaming is used in English and in Hebrew

¹⁶ *The Maggid of Dubno; and his parables* הקול קול יעקב compiled by Benno Heinemann page 63

¹⁷ Genesis 24:67 נִצְחָק אֶתְרַנְיָהוּ וַיַּבְאֶךָּ וַיַּצְחַק הָאָדָם שֶׁרֶה אָמָּו וַיַּקְרַב אֶת־רֶבֶקָה וַיִּתְהִלֵּן לְאַשְׁהָ נִיאָהָה וַיַּגְתֵּב Isaac then brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rebekah as his wife. Isaac loved her, and thus found comfort after his mother's death.

¹⁸ Genesis 6:6 And G-d regretted having made humankind וַיַּנְחַטֵּה הָאָדָם וַיַּנְחַטֵּה

¹⁹ Genesis 3:19 בְּזָעַת אַפִּיךְ תִּאכְלֶל לְחֵם By the sweat of your brow shall you get bread to eat

²⁰ Genesis 14:2 ... עַשְׂרֵנָה מִלְחָמָה אֶת־בָּבֶרֶעַ made war on King Bera of Sodom, King Birsha of Gomorrah, King Shinab of Admah, King Shemeber of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela, which is Zoar

וְשָׁבַת also refers to an idea of “wholeness” or “complete”. Translation from Hebrew to English is therefore not a matter of a simple one-to-one function. Hebrew roots can be interpreted with a variety of nuanced understandings, and with those nuances in meaning, the grammar used can add facets that direct word-for-word translations struggle to include. Understanding the various deeper and sometimes hidden meanings of root units can add many facets to exploring Hebrew texts. When we understand the various *shoresh* meanings, it can change and deepen the relationship with the words, ideas, and stories of the Holy texts.

“Grammar… is a window into how a group speaks to itself, structures its own thoughts, and defines its world.”²¹ This is particularly true when encountering the concise language of the ancient Hebrew of the Torah. This is among the reasons that this nearly unchanged manuscript has held its prominence for over 3,000 years. Hebrew has undergone several transitions. The variations that are available in understanding the uses and grammar of the words invite one to play: play with understandings and play with textual and extratextual meanings. The key of the word play and the key of understanding the *shoresh* is the story. Every word, every *shoresh*, tells a story.

Words have their definitions, their meanings and yet in the context of sentences, those meanings can become ambiguous, creating new readings and new meanings for the story as a whole. Verbs in all languages are conjugated into different forms and the different conjugations in Hebrew shape varied meanings. Each individual word tells a story. When we speak, the words, the sentences, the paragraphs, are building a symphony, each heard, listened to, all the voices together. If one voice is missing, it is a lesser composition. The stories that the word tells takes on different meanings within the sentence. For example, one might think that the word “I” (אני) has only one basic meaning - referring to the speaker him/her/themselves. And yet, perhaps there are more possible meanings, as we see in the following midrash about some of our ancestors.

Isaac, Yaakov, and the Lie

²¹ *The Grammar of God*; Aviya Kushner, Introduction.

Isaac has called his son, Esau, and asked for him to hunt game meat so that Esau would receive his father's blessing...

וַיָּבֹא אֶל־אָבִיו וַיֹּאמֶר אָבִי וַיֹּאמֶר הַפְּנֵי מִי אַפְתָּה בְּנִי:

He went to his father and said, "Father." And he said, "Yes, who are you, my son?

וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֶל־אָבִיו אָנֹכִי עַשְׂנָו בְּכֶרֶת עֲשֵׂיתִי כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבְרָת אֶלְيָי קְוֹמִים־גָּנוֹת שְׁבָה וְאַכְלָה
מֵאַיִל בְּעַבּוֹר תְּבִרְכָּנִי נַפְשָׁךְ:

Yaakov said to his father, "I am Esau, your first-born; I have done as you told me. Pray, sit up and eat of my game, that you may give me your innermost blessing."²²

Read literally, with the punctuation as shown here, Yaakov is understood to be, in the words of Isaac, **בְּמַרְמָה**, (with guile), a falsifier, a liar. Rashi²³, however, explains the same words differently. "Yaakov said to his father, "I am (your son); Esau is your first-born; ..." This ambiguity contained within the same words, allows for deeper and more varied understandings and stories.

Prayers and texts are often translated into the vernacular alongside the Hebrew. All translation, all translation, all translation is interpretation. It is always commentary. A standard is used, according to the translators' points of view, and usually, a desire to streamline the interpretation to the most concise language. Once a translation becomes very well established, it may obscure some of the other myriad interpretations that the original may imply. Often one hears an indictment of G*d for "hardening Pharaoh's heart" when Moshe was negotiating the release of Egypt's Hebrew slaves. This translation of the Biblical phrase has been so established, it has become an accepted fact that Pharaoh had no leeway or choice in letting the Israelites go. In the Biblical Hebrew texts, there are, in fact, three different verbs used. In Exodus 7:3, when G*d explains to Moshe what will happen the word used is **אָקַשָּׁה**. The root of this word does

²² Genesis 27:18-19.

²³ Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, known as Rashi (based on an acronym of his Hebrew initials), is one of the most influential and prolific Jewish commentators in history. He was born in Troyes, Champagne, in northern France, in 1040. Many of his explanations of texts created stories, *midrashim*, some of which are told so often, they might be mistaken for text.

indeed translate as “hard” and the full word as “I will harden”. When Moshe and his brother, Aaron, are standing before Pharaoh in Exodus 7:13, the King James translation reads “he hardened Pharaoh's heart” and the Hebrew verb is **רָקַעַ**. This root is more precisely interpreted as “strengthen” and the full word is reflexive in its presentation, …Pharaoh's heart “became stronger”. The third verb that the Torah uses is, in Exodus 8:10, **רָקַעַ**.²⁴ Once again, the King James translation reads “he hardened his heart.” This root word, **רָקַעַ** (K.B.D.), can mean heavy, and glory, and honor; the full word, in this *passuk*, is reflexive. These nuances can be obscured or disregarded or even completely forgotten if one limits one's reading to popular translated texts. Though they are not incorrect, they shroud and perhaps eclipse the subtlety of what can be a deeper understanding of the stories.

The Bible has about 2,000 Semitic roots (*Shorashim*). Sociologists have suggested that the more words a society has to describe a particular concept, the more important that concept is to that society. The number of synonyms displays the importance an idea holds for the group that uses this language. Hebrew has a comparatively small number of word units, and there are still multiple synonyms for certain ideas within this language. Story, speaking, telling, saying, declaring, articulating, verbalizing, enouncing, disclosing, voicing, pronouncing; clearly the act of utterance is important to the English-speaking world, as this is a short list of synonyms. Biblical Hebrew has many words that refer to speech, among them; **רְמָא.** (*A.M.R.*), **רְבָד.** (*D.V/B.R.*), **רְבָד.** (*S.F/P.R.*), **רְבָד.** (*H.G.D.*), **לְשָׁנָה.** (*L.SH.N.*), **לְשָׁנָה.** (*D.R.SH.*), **לְשָׁנָה.** (*V/B.K.SH.*). According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, English has somewhere between seven hundred fifty thousand and one million words. By comparison, Modern Hebrew has some one hundred thousand words and Torah has approximately 8,679 distinct words, including 1,480 hapax legomena, which are words that only appear once.

²⁴ I will present a more detailed discussion of this root later.

Midrash

There are many Hebrew words for “story”; among them is the word *midrash* מִדְרָשׁ.²⁵ This word generally indicates a story or many stories, about Biblical characters that don't appear in the Biblical texts themselves. *Midrash* is more than the Rabbinic telling of stories that the Bible does not elucidate. “It [*midrash*] is a process, a mode of creative interpretation and an application of traditional texts in light of changing contemporary insight and needs.”²⁶ The *midrash* changes, evolves, and moves each time it is told; it serves to elucidate and illuminate. The *shoresh* of the word *midrash*, מִדְרָשׁ is שְׁרָשׁ .D.R.SH . It can be interpreted as a demand, a reckoning, a questioning, a requirement, to resort to, to seek out, to investigate, to interpret, to seek with care, to request of G*d, to teach, to frequent (a place²⁷). This root word is used in Biblical texts in each of these ways; the contexts and the grammar are how we arrive at and delve into understanding the words.

The first time this root is used in Torah is Genesis 9:5. The root is used three times in this *passuk*, but none of them have to do with story. In this *passuk*, the *shoresh* שְׁרָשׁ refers to G*d’s demand: “But for your own life-blood I will require a reckoning שְׁרָשׁ: I will require it אֶלְרַשְׁבָּנָה of every beast; of humankind, too, will I require a reckoning שְׁרָשׁ for human life, of everyone for each other!”

A Story: Noah and G*d’s Midrash

The Torah tells of a world gone to such extreme evil that G*d could not tolerate its continued existence. No one, it seemed, was worthy of the *tov* (good) world that G*d had built with will and with words. No one except Noah, the man who had found “favor in the eyes of G*d”.²⁸ The inhabitants of the wicked world descended further into cruelty, depravity, and evil. G*d had decided to destroy what G*d had created. Water filled the earth, rain, like G*d’s own tears streamed over the plains, the mountains, the desert, the forests. Water rose from the rivers,

²⁵ The root word *d.r.sh* has many meanings. On some of the history of the term מִדְרָשׁ, see Mandel, *The Origins of Midrash*.

²⁶ Hebrew Roots Jewish Routes; A Tribal Language in a Global World by Jeremy Bernstein page 8

²⁷ BDB dictionary: † שְׁרָשׁ¹⁶² vb. resort to, seek (cf. Arabic سُرَّبَ rub over, efface (a site), tread (wheat), fig. read repeatedly, study; 打 beat (a path), discuss, Pa. practise in; NH search out (a meaning), expound)

²⁸ Genesis 6:8

the seas, the streams, the swamps, until the world churned with deadly waves. Only Noah's family, ensconced in a crowded, smell filled, animal stocked, tar painted ark survived the horror.

Noah had just emerged from his temporary home. After 370 days he exits the ark, he makes an offering of thanksgiving to G*d and G*d promises never again to destroy the world. G*d then renews the blessing that was bestowed on the first humans to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the Earth" for Noah and his family. G*d makes some new directives for the budding societies. The first humans were allowed to eat only vegetarian foods²⁹ and Noah's descendants would be permitted meat with the caution that the life-blood of the flesh is not to be eaten. G*d continues with a new directive.

G*d demands a reckoning, and explanation, a restitution for the blood spilled by each human, for each human. G*d would *d'rash* from people the story of their actions, their reasoning and their understanding. This *shoresh*, like so many others, has many rich and varied interpretive meanings ; D.R.SH. means exploration, inquiry, demand, seeking, reckoning, story, explanation, requirement. The context and grammatical conjugation of the *shoresh* will help determine how to interpret the *shoresh*.

Another famous story in Torah that focuses on D.R.SH. is Genesis 25:22. Rivka is pregnant with twin boys who are causing her immense pain. Distressed and confused she goes "li'drosh" from the Eternal. She turns to G*d to demand explanations for the reason for her condition.

G*d responds to her demand. She is told that there are two nations within her body, that each of the two has a destiny, and that they are fighting for prominence. 'Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples shall be separated from your body'. Armed with this elucidation, Rivka tells them to apologize to one another.³⁰

²⁹ Rashi Sanhedrin 59b

³⁰ A retelling of part of the *midrash* in Aggadat Bereshit 73b. Rivka may be apologizing to G*d, to her husband, or as this retelling suggests, she might be speaking with her children, insisting that they find a way forward together.

A Midrash; The Biggest One ; A very famous *midrash* to do with Abraham destroying the idols in his father's idol shop.

Abraham's father, Terah, was an influential and important man in his village. He sold the gods to the townspeople, the finely crafted beautiful idols that were thought to protect the home. He sold idols of stone, of wood, and very special ones of precious metals, copper silver and gold. Each idol was a piece of art, each its own shape and size to honor the god it depicted. Abraham did not believe in the protection of those things crafted by his father's talented hands. He did not believe that the expensive golden statue could do anything more than look lovely on the shelf.

One day, when Terah had left the shop in his son's care for a time. Confident in his belief in the One True G*d, Abraham approached the small golden figure, he raised the hand in which he grasped a heavy stone, and brought it down on the god's head. The precious metal folded, misshapen and flattened, onto its pedestal. He repeated his actions again and again throughout his father's shop until all but one of the idols was set among the wreckage. The largest of the gods stood with the stone laid upon its hand.

When Terah returned to see the disaster that his shop had become, he was incensed.

“What happened here?!” he demanded of Abraham.

“Why, the large idol became jealous of the offerings that we had placed before the smaller one,” Abraham replied reasonably, “he grasped the stone, and pounded each of the others to submission.”

“What nonsense are you speaking? Idols are still and cannot strike others, they cannot see what is offered to the other gods, they cannot feel jealous. They are stone and wood and metal.”

Whereupon Abraham retorted, "Should not your ears listen to what your mouth is saying?"³¹

Often the text and grammar will produce various interpretations. Manipulating root units produces multitudes of meanings and provides fodder for stories, *midrashim*. This wrestling with the text is the work of *midrash*, and indeed, the work of Torah study; even the word for "story" itself can take on new meanings in different contexts. The root unit D.R.SH. forms the basis for the idea of delving, searching, conceptualizing and storying. Most writing has been "devoted to *midrash* as a hermeneutic, as an exegetical act. Little interest has been shown in *midrashic* discourse itself -in *midrash*'s own literary language, the rhetorical and poetic forms and modalities in which *midrash* as exegesis, as a hermeneutical act, is preserved in the texts of Rabbinic literature."³²

Every word in the Torah is significant. The Rabbis throughout history have asserted that, not simply every word, every letter, and even every section of every letter has meaning. This project will look at the shorashim, words, the wealth of meanings, and stories of the Shema.

The rabbis of the Talmud tell a story about how even our teacher Moshe, the first receiver and transmitter of Torah encountered this idea of the depth of meaning of every single word, even every letter, in new and surprising ways...

A *midrash*, The Crowns on the Letters; a retelling of a famous story based on Talmud Bavli Menakhot 29b.

When Moshe, who would become known to Jews of the future as the greatest of teachers, climbed Sinai to receive what would be the Torah, he saw G*d was adding crowns onto several letters in the Torah. Moshe was curious, he asked,

"B'nai Israel are waiting for your Torah, why do You add this flourish?"

G*d explained that, in the future, there will be a great teacher, Akiva son of Yosef, who will need the crowns to delve into the study. He will derive, even from the

³¹ A retelling of the *midrash* in Genesis Rabbah chapter 38

³² *Parables in Midrash* narrative and exegesis in rabbinic literature by David Stern page 15

flourishes and crowns, many *halachot* (laws, paths). Moshe wanted to meet this immense teacher. G*d caused Moshe to travel through time and paused centuries after his lifetime, in Rabbi Akiva's classroom. There, rows of young and older men sat raptly absorbed in the study of the ancient texts, discussing, arguing, questioning and restarting the process anew. The cacophony of the learned men's discussions reverberated within the crowded room as each man gave his passionate assertions and expositions of the texts sitting before him.

Sitting in the eighth row, Moshe watched Rabbi Akiva expound on “*kol kotz v'kotz*” כל קוץ וקוץ - every thorn and thorn. Rabbi Akiva discussed with his students the crown of three points that adorns the letters ע,ב,ט,ז,ג,ש and ז in the Torah. Moshe sat, bewildered and frightened. He understood nothing of what this great teacher was speaking. He became convinced that the descendants of the Israelites he was leading to the Promised Land had abandoned the *derekh* דרך, the path of G*d. He became distraught, terrified. Would his life's work be nullified by the descendants of the Israelites? Worse, would they abandon the relationship with G*d, who had bound them as a People?

Moshe sat, uncomprehending, unnoticed, unseen, in the room, his head cradled in his hands, tears streamed down his face, he continued to listen to the students questioning their Rav. Investigating source after source, text after text, the disciples asked question after question; others found responses, which caused more questions, more arguments, and more investigations. Finally, one question came from one of the younger students “Rabbi, how do you know this? Where did this teaching come from?”

Rabbi Akiva answered into the sudden silence “We know this is *halacha leMoshe MiSinai*- a law transmitted to Moshe at Sinai”.

Moshe, hearing these words, was comforted. The Israelites had continued on the Path, the *derekh*. They had continued to learn, to develop and deepen their understanding of the Torah that he would painstakingly bring down from his face-to-face meeting with G*d.

He understood that every word, and every letter, and every section would allow a deeper and more meaningful connection with G*d. Moshe knew, then, that the descendants of the people he was leading from slavery would continue into the expanse of history. They would work to maintain a relationship with G*d. He was heartened to know the relationship would not be lost to the mists of time, nor to the assimilation of different Peoples. The Israelites would retain their own identity and their connection with the Creator and with the Gift of the Words of Torah.³³

There are many different types of stories that are used in many different contexts. Above we talked about “*midrash*”, which is a very broad category for many different types of stories. There is also a more specific type of story that is used to convey an ethical teaching or lesson. We often see this in some folktales that convey an ethical idea in a concrete narrative form. Within Jewish tradition, some of these lessons appear in the form of a parable.

Master storyteller Peninnah Schram teaches the power and efficacy of the folk story and the parable. A folktale is a traditional story that is passed down through generations of a community or culture. Folktales can be used to share history, reinforce cultural values, and/or highlight traditions. A parable is a simple short story often used to teach a moral or lesson. Parables are often metaphorical analogies that use human characters. In Hebrew, the word parable, the story, is *מַשָּׁל* (*mashal*) and the moral or lesson it is meant to teach is called the *נִמְשָׁל* (*nimshal*). The two words share the root *ל.ש.ל.* indicating a proverb, poem, an ethical wisdom, byword, and an example.

³³ This is a retelling of the Midrash in Talmud Bavli Menahot 29b. It continues to a tragic and incomprehensible conclusion: Moshe returns to the presence of G*d. He says, “You have this teacher, with his great understanding, with his vast knowledge, why choose to give your Torah through me, why not through this teacher?” G*d responded “Be Silent! This is the intention that has arisen before me!” Moshe was silent for some time and then ventured further, “Sovereign of the Universe, You have shown me this man’s Torah, show me now his reward.” G*d tells Moshe to return to the place he last saw the great teacher. When Moshe arrived, he viewed Rabbi Akiva’s wasted flesh being weighed on a butcher’s scale, because he had been tortured to death by the Romans. Moshe sobbed before the Lord, “Sovereign of the Universe! This Torah! And this is its reward!?” G*d responded “Be Silent! This is the intention that has arisen before me!” The Talmud ends **this** story here. Another midrash of Rabbi Akiva’s death appears below.

(A personal thought: I have often imagined that G*d’s first response was frustration for Moshe’s initial reluctance to be G*d’s representative in Egypt; and the second time G*d utters those same words, I have imagined that G*d cries from sadness with the inevitability and necessity of these events.)

The mashal's purpose is to illuminate verse or passage of Torah, or to clarify a Jewish custom or tradition. A Jewish parable differs from the general Parable in that it is composed of two parts; a *nimshal* and a *mashal*. The *nimshal* is the frame: a question that is set up at the beginning, followed by a connection at the end that serves as a direct response to the question first posed. The *nimshal* teaches us what we can learn from the *mashal* and how to apply that lesson.³⁴

A *mashal* about Psalm 92:12

“The righteous (person) shall flourish like the palm tree; he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon”

Concerning this verse in the Psalm the Maggid of Mezritch said: “There are two kinds of righteous people. Some of them spend time on mankind. They teach them and take trouble about them. Others concern themselves only with the teachings themselves. The first bear nourishing fruit, like the date palm; the second are like the cedar, lofty and unfruitful.³⁵

The *nimshal* of this parable seems to indicate that the righteous person who concerns himself with others, taking others' needs into account and spending time and effort to teach them is a more desirable righteous person than one who remains isolated and engages in the lofty learning without sharing this bounty with the world. On the other hand, the *mashal* also indicates that both scholars are important to exist.

A retelling of an old Jewish parable attributed to Rabbi Yaakov Kranz (1741–1804), the Maggid of Dubno.

The Birth of Parable

Truth stood in the town square. Naked and shivering, she shouted out “Listen! Hear what I have to say! You must listen!” but no one would pay her any attention. People passed by, looking away, shielding themselves from Truth's raw harshness. Truth

³⁴ Schram, *Jewish Stories One Generation Tells Another*, 3. For more about parables in rabbinic literature, see Stern, *Parables in Midrash*.

³⁵ Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, 101.

shouted and shouted, she shouted herself hoarse, and she shouted more. She told Truth to all that would not listen, to all that would not hear.

One day Fantasy came streaming on the wind into the town square. With every breeze, Fantasy danced and twinkled, her rainbow colors fluttered and floated. She entranced and delighted every person who gazed upon her. When the people neared Fantasy, she disappeared. They could not hold on to her ephemeral nature; she dissipated into the merest vapor at the lightest touch.

The wind swirled around the square, and soon, Fantasy landed on Truth. Truth now glistened and danced. No longer naked, Truth no longer frightened the people. Holding on to Truth's solidity, Fantasy could be embraced and held - in the form of Parable, Story. Seeing her dressed in Fantasy's sparkle and finery, the people found they could approach, really hear, and accept Truth.³⁶

Story is intrinsically valuable, not only for its methodology as a teaching tool, or a reflection of cultural or social structure, but, an inherently valuable creation for its own sake. Story is a vehicle, but it is not only a vehicle. It is itself. Story is truth covered with color, sprinkled with magic and effervescence. It is how we see ourselves, and how we show our next generation where they came from. Sharing stories is painting with words, building with imagination, and weaving chains of ideas that span throughout the worlds we create as communities.

Hebrew, in all of its historical incarnations, is made up of consonantal roots. Each root word can have many meanings; the context and the formulation of the vowelizations, suffixes and prefixes even more meanings can be derived from these words. The root word system creates multiple interpretations and allows for many stories. Tradition has created myriads of stories, fables, folktales, *midrash*, and *mashalim* to explain, interpret, comment, approach, invent, and weave through the Law, stories, and narratives of so many faces of Torah.

³⁶ The original tale told by the Maggid of Dubno has Truth being helped by Parable, who dresses her in Parable's colors and sparkle and in this way Parable makes Truth able to be heard. In this retelling, Parable is born from the combination of Truth and Fantasy. The added element names an additional type of story.

Hebrew is a magical language

Abracadabra is a word of magic, evoking mystery, excitement and remarkable feats. In Hebrew and in the semitic language of Aramaic, it reads אָבְרָא כְּדָבָרָא. The root word ב.ר.א. *barah* has to do with miraculous creation, the type of creation that is Divine: something from nothing, *ex nihilo*. It is the second word in the Torah: בְּרָא. The term בְּרָא is the act of creation, the action of nothingness becoming some-thing. בְּרָא (B-R-AA) is an action that is only Divine, human creativity is described with a very different *shoresh*, יָצַר (Y-Tz-R), though G*d can perform this type of creation, as well. The prefix א indicates “I will”- future tense, first person - singular. אָבְרָא - Abra. Magic is the power of apparently influencing the course of events by using mysterious or supernatural forces, performed by humans.

In English, the concepts of speech and matter differ from each other. Speech is ephemeral and temporal, whereas matter has permanence and constance. In Hebrew, this difference is less pronounced. There are many Hebrew *shorashim* that mean “speech or talk.” The root word ר.ב.ר. has to do with both speech and with matter (speech matters). There are many times in the Torah that the word “וַיֹּאמֶר” (va’yedaber), “and he spoke” appears, it is often followed by the word לֹאמֶר (ley-mor), “saying”. The universe was spoken into being. The first chapter of Genesis describes G*d saying and the speech manifests into being, but the *shorashim* for that speech are ר.מ.א. and א.ר.ק. The evident question is, given the conciseness of the Torah, why use two words for speech? The word דבר does not mean simply speech. It also means thing, event, idea, and matter.

The first time that we encounter the word דבר, is when G*d first speaks with Noah.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל-נֹחַ לֵאמֹר. “And G*d spoke with Noah saying.”³⁷

אַחֲרֵ הַקְּבָרִים הָאֶלְהָה הִיא זְבָרָה אֶל-אַבָּרָם בְּמִחְזָה לֵאמֹר אֶל-תִּירְאָ אַבָּרָם אָנֹכִי מֶגֶן לְךָ שְׁכָרָה כַּרְבָּה מְאֹד

“After these things happened, G*d spoke with Avram, saying, “Do not fear Avram, I am shielding you, your value is exceedingly high.”³⁸

The word דבר is used as both “thing, occurrences, or events” and as “spoke; The prefix כ means “as” or “like”. The magic word “abracadabra”, אָבְרָא כְּדָבָרָא, can mean, “I will create as (I) speak”; magic.

The word “prayer,” according to the Random House Dictionary, is defined as a devout petition to God or an object of worship, a spiritual communion with God or an object of worship,

³⁷ Genesis 8:15

³⁸ Genesis 12:4

as in supplication, thanksgiving, adoration, or confession. The עמָשׁ Shm'ah statement does not comply with any of these definitions. There are Jewish people who do not know, however, that it is not really a prayer, but an affirmation, a public formal assertion of a fact. When each of us, individually, recites these six words, we are stating that we are a collective, a group, a people. We declare, assert that We, individually and together, believe in this One G*d. The liturgical unit called “Sh’mah” is composed of several biblical passages; the term can also refer first to the first line, which begins with this word and is drawn from Deut 6:4.

It is said that when one loses one’s sense of sight, the sense of hearing increases. Of course, this is not factual, but people do increase their *listening* when their vision is blocked. For this reason, we cover our eyes when we recite the six words of the עמָשׁ. We block our sense of sight in order to listen more closely to the words, the meanings, and the stories of עמָשׁ שָׁמָעַ.

Jewish liturgy and Biblical texts have been studied for millennia. Many translated texts will explain the essence of the Hebrew words. Here, I am suggesting other ways that one might look at some words in common prayers, liturgy, and TaNaCh texts. I am not presenting definitions, but rather, ideas for another way of entering the spirit of the ancient writings. Stories and *midrashim* create fertile soil for imagination and spirituality to connect with the ancient Holy writings. I will focus on the six words of the pervasive passage known as the “Sh’mah”, as a phrase and as the individual words and root-units (shorashim). I have spoken about the power of the *shoresh* (the root), the power of story and the power of interpreting texts. In the rest of this project I will go word by word through the six words of the affirmation of “Sh’mah” to unpack some of the meanings and interpretations of each root and connect them with stories. This is by no means a comprehensive or apodictic work. It is meant to suggest an additional facet of the jewels of our liturgical and Biblical texts.

שמע ישראל

Shema Yisrael

Among the most ubiquitously known invocation in the Jewish world is known as “**שמע ישראל**”

The Sh'mah is the statement that Jews in Israel employ as an exclamation of surprise or expression when startled or fearful. Many Jewish people follow the tradition of covering their eyes when they recite the first 6 words of this prayer. Many Jews know that it is a 6-word preamble and is often followed by **ואהבת** (*Ve'ahavta*) paragraph. Many Jews know the words of this most significant prayer.

The six word statement of the **שמע** appears only once in the Torah, in the book of **דברים** Deuteronomy 6:4. Throughout Deuteronomy Moshe retells the Israelite journey across the wilderness, as they gather waiting to enter the Promised Land. As the nation waits to enter the land that they traveled for forty years to reach. Moshe had gathered them and tells them their story, much of it from his own point of view. Moshe instructs the people on how to maintain the partnership formed at Sinai. He tells them to teach the next generations, to talk about, discuss, and to keep these instructions in their mouths and on their hearts.

In Liturgy, it and the surrounding *berachot* (ברכות blessings), first appears in the Seder of Rav Amram, 9th century C.E. in Babylonia.

“Hear O Israel! The Lord is our G*d, the Lord is One”

שמע ישראל ה' אלקינו, ה' אחד

A story: Bringing the Children Home

In 1945, after the Shoah (the Holocaust), Rabbi Eliezer Silver, president of the Union of Orthodox Rabbis in USA and Canada, was traveling around the devastated war-torn areas of the Nazi occupation. He and Dayan Grunfeld from England traveled through many European countries to which World War II had laid waste. He interceded with governments and leaders to reunite Jewish communities and families. He worked at collecting the Jewish children who had been hidden from the Nazis with Christian neighbors and friends, orphanages, nunneries, and monasteries, to return them to their families.

He arrived in a small remote town in a mountainous area of France, in the Alsace-Lorraine region. There he had heard of a group of children secreted from Germany to the relative protection of unoccupied France. The priests of this orphanage and the families did not want these beloved adoptees to leave. The children had spent years with their adopted families, the caring people who took them in, sheltered them, hid them, protected them often at great risk.

“There are no Jewish children, only German refugees of the war”, the priests asserted. The Rabbi, determined to return to his people their legacy, their future, asked the leaders of the town to gather the refugee children together, just before the children were to go to their beds. The families reluctantly agreed and they gathered the children in the town square. In a clear loud voice, Rabbi Silver began to sing the powerful words

“Sh’mah Yisrael, HaShem Eloaynu, HaShem Echad!”

שמע ישראל ה' אלוקינו, ה' אחד

Some of the children began to cry, some called out for their remembered “Mamas”. They had forgotten much of their former lives, but the song that Rabbi Silver offered caused them to raise their hands to their eyes, some began to sing the ancient words that their parents had sung with them in the morning and in the evening. Rabbi Silver was thus able to identify and unite sundered families.³⁹

There is a tradition for a person to recite the Sh’mah when death is imminent. When the soul is ready to depart from its body, a most sacred moment, the person affirms the belief in the One G*d and a sense of *t’shuva*,repentance and return.

A story: The Death of Rabbi Akiva

Rabbi Akiva ben Joseph was captured by the Romans for the crime of teaching Torah. This is the same teacher that Moses visited and learned from. They devised a horrific death for this great sage; iron combs raked the skin from his flesh while his disciples looked on and wept. The Romans began this torture at the time of daily recitation of the Sh’mah, Rabbi Akiva filled his lungs with air and said the words of Sh’mah Yisrael. His students looked on and weeping, asked.

³⁹ This story is a retelling based on the story presented in “Greetings from the Surviving Members of the Jewish People; A Travel Report” by Rabbi Eliezer Silver (<https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/language-literature-culture/pakn-treger/2018-pakn-treger-translation-issue/greetings-surviving>). There is a similar story about an American Jew named Lieberman, recorded by Holocaust Historian Yaffa Eliach (The Shema by Norman Lamm)

“Our Teacher, even now when you are in such pain, such suffering, you are reciting the Sh’mah?”

He said to them:

“All my days I have been troubled by the verse: ‘With all your soul’, meaning: Even if G*d takes your soul. I said to myself: When will the opportunity be afforded me to fulfill this verse? Now that it has been afforded to me, shall I not fulfill it? “

He prolonged his uttering of the word One, until his soul left his body as he uttered his final word: “One”.⁴⁰

A retelling of a *Midrash* based on the Gemara:⁴¹

Shema at the End

As the Israelite patriarch, named Yaakov, named Israel, lay awaiting his approaching death, he expressed concern that his children or their children would abandon the Holy One. He felt the Shechina, the Presence of G*d, leave him, and he mourned that loss, and he mourned even more strongly the possibility of his future generations losing the special bond that he shared with G*d. He thought that someone who was there, one of his own children, may have some doubt in their own mind or soul of the Presence of G*d. They had been surrounded and influenced by the pagan Egyptians. He feared for his lineage, feared the loss of the special relationship he, his father and grandfather had built with the true living G*d. Yaakov became distressed by this thought, blaming himself for bringing his progeny to face this terrifying future. He could foresee that at sometime his children’s descendants might abandon their heritage; might follow the Other in pursuing the false gods that could appeal to people less passionate about this covenantal relationship with the Creator.

His family surrounded him; perhaps holding one another, united in purpose and in voice, they declared the words that would console their father, and our progenitor. allowing him to pass into the afterlife with the peace and hope that he needed.

“Sh’mah Yisrael, HaShem Elohaynu, HaShem Echad!”

שמע ישראל ה' אלקינו, ה' אחד

⁴⁰A retelling of this martyr’s death from Berachot 61b

⁴¹This is a retelling of the midrash in Pesachim 56a

Hear us, Yisrael, (G*D's name, the Tetragrammaton) is our G*d - (this) G*d is One! And just as you hold no other god in your heart, we also hold only the One G*d in our hearts."

Yaakov/Yisrael heard these words, breathed in, and in a soft voice, recited the words many quote three times every day

Baruch shem kevod Malchuto le-olam va'ed,

Yaakov was heartened, he knew then that his legacy of a relationship with the G*d would be sustained because his children knew how to value righteousness. Only then, did the patriarch allow himself to be taken to *Olam HaBah* (the next world).

In the hand-scribed Torah scrolls, this passuk (biblical sentence) appears with an enlarged **ו** (ayin), the last letter in the word **עַמּוֹ** and an enlarged **ת** (daled), the last letter in the word **תְּבָנָה**. The tradition of the manner of writing the letters in the Torah is highly technical and requires absolute precision. Scribes write the texts following the same rules throughout the world, and in fact throughout history. Therefore, there must be reasons for aberrations. There are about 100 "abnormal" letters in the Masoretic text of the Bible. One explanation offered by Vayikra Rabbah 19:2, Baal Haturim and Kli Yakar to Deuteronomy 6:4⁴² suggests that this phrase is of critical importance to speak accurately. If one were to mispronounce the **ו** (ayin) so that it sounded like an **א** (aleph), one would change the meaning of the word *sh'mah*, listen (and more - as we will explore below), to *she'mah*, maybe. It is also vital that if the **ת** (daled) might appear without its "tail", it might be mistaken for the letter **ר** (resh). This might render the word "**תְּבָנָה**" (*echad*), One, into the word "**תְּבָנָה**" (*acher*) other or additional. This would change the text to be understood very differently. Indeed, it might cause one to interpret this most important text as eliminating the relationship asserted in the original reading.⁴³

The two letters, read together, spell the Hebrew word for witness, **תְּוִיד** (*eid*). Thus this declaration is saying that the People of Israel attest to their loyalty to the One G*d, that they stand as witness to this affirmation. This word can also be interpreted as eternity and until, and to.

Many translations, many interpretations, many stories.

⁴²https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1019954/jewish/WhY-the-LargE-LetterS.htm

⁴³ Ibid.

Sh'mah

שְׁמָעָ

Sh'mah: This word is usually translated as hear or listen. In English, those two words are often considered synonymous, a word or phrase that means exactly or nearly the same as another word; but why have two words with identical meanings? They are, of course, not identical, they represent differing nuances. Hearing is the involuntary sense, the physiological reception of sound waves. Listening is the more intentional intake of auditory stimulus and incorporating that into one's understanding. Peninnah Schram, teacher, author, Maggiddah explains in "The Voice is the Messenger of the Heart" "Shared Stories Still Work Best" an essay in *Tradition*, Volume 37:4, Fall 2003: The word "listen" is derived from the old English from the word "hlystan" meaning to hear, and "hlosnian", meaning to 'wait in suspense'. Listening involves a suspension of the self, allowing the input from hearing to create a spark of understanding and motivation for action. "Listening is being able to be changed...(by what is heard)" --Alan Alda⁴⁴.

שְׁמָעָ also conveys the act of understanding, consenting, and obeying. These are not separate ideas, but a unified concept of hearing, listening, understanding, agreeing and obeying that which has been communicated. This is not a passive or uninvolved verb, but a conscious action, made with intention and will.

On one of the holiest days of the Jewish calendar, Rosh Hashanah, we have the commandment to hear the shofar; to listen to the sound of *t'ruah*. Not to make the noise, but to hear it. It is intimately and integrally connected with the day, with its sacredness, and with the connotations of the judgement of G*d and the awesome nature of the day. We recite the *bracha*, (blessing) Baruch ata HaShem Elo-heinu⁴⁵ melekh ha-olam asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu lishmoa kol shofar. Blessed are You, HaShem our God, Ruler of the universe, who has made us holy with commandments, and who has commanded us to hear the voice of the shofar.

The passuk begins: "וַיֹּאמֶר הַשּׁוֹרֵר הַזֶּה קֹל שְׁמָעָ" The voice of the shofar grew stronger and louder."⁴⁶ The shofar's sound grew in volume and intensity as the *Aseret HaDibrot (the Ten Utterances)* were received by the Israelites at Har Sinai. The mitzvah is not to sound the shofar, not to blow it, not to see it, but to hear it; to שְׁמָעָ, to encompass in order to understand, to pay attention. The sounds that we blow throughout the world are significant. We hear the *tekiah*, the long wailing single note, the three broken notes of *shevarim*, the halting nine bursts of *teruah*, and the long, mournful, inspiring cry of *tekiah gedolah*.

⁴⁴ Heard in his podcast Clear and Vivid <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/clear-vivid-with-alan-alda>

⁴⁵ The Name of G*d is often changed in order to avoid inappropriate or incorrect use. In writing, the Name (lit; HaShem) is rendered in order to avoid inadvertent disrespect or destruction G*d's Name

⁴⁶ Exodus 19:19

Each separate sound reverberates eerily through the unusually full, silent room. The *tekiah*, according to Ben Ish Chai⁴⁷, is the triumphant blast made in acknowledgement of Glory of the King. This blare symbolizes the joyous sound of proclaiming G*d as King, with whom we have a refreshed personal relationship. "The Ben Ish Chai writes that these sounds are meant to contrast with the *tekiah*. The *tekiah*, he explains, is a sound of triumph and joy, while the *shevarim* and *teruah* are sounds of pain and suffering." This is a joyous shout throughout the Jewish world, communicating to ourselves and each other our unity, our connection both within each person, and with one another. The different emotions and sounds unite, blasted in quick succession, and allude to the transient nature of life. It is illustrated in this story:

Long ago and far away there lived a king who was very affected by the things that happened in his life. If there were good events in the kingdom, the weather was fine, the crops came in abundance, the neighbors were peaceful, and the kingdom prospered, the king celebrated. He celebrated with enthusiasm, even, it must be said, in excess! He gave lavish, indulgent parties, he spent generously and thoughtlessly.

When things were less desirable in his kingdom, he also reacted with vehemence. He arrested, jailed and even executed people with whom he disagreed. He committed his armies to wars, or decreed severe restrictions on his people.

His advisors were distraught! They loved their king, but every situation caused an extreme reaction in the king. They knew that this was not sustainable; not for their people, not for their kingdom, and not even for their beloved king. One sage realized that the king was living only in the immediate moment, no thought was given to the ephemeral nature of every situation. This sage made a beautiful ring and presented it to the king. Engraved on this ring were the words "*This, too, shall pass*". If he were troubled and in pain, if the kingdom was endangered or suffering, he would look at his ring and remember that the hardship would eventually end. During times of happiness and comfort, he would gaze at the ring as well. He would realize that his wealth and good fortune could change for the worse in an instant. This thought comforted him.

All things change, all things end, the shofar sounds change, mingle, shift one to another. The joyous *tekiah* brackets each of the sobbing and halting *teruah* and *shevarim*.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Yosef Hayim, known as Ben Ish Hai for his most known work, was a leading Baghdadi *hakham*, authority on halakha, and Master Kabbalist. He is best known as the author of the work on halakha. Ben Ish Hai is a collection of the laws of everyday life interspersed with mystical insights and customs, addressed to the masses and arranged by the weekly Torah portion.

⁴⁸This is a retelling of the story that appears in this article; [https://torah.org/learning/yomtov-roshhashanah-vol3no16/#:~:text=Good%20times%20are%20not%20forever,a%20state%20of%20jubilation%20again.\]](https://torah.org/learning/yomtov-roshhashanah-vol3no16/#:~:text=Good%20times%20are%20not%20forever,a%20state%20of%20jubilation%20again.)

The *shevarim* call is the sound of three short blasts of air through the shofar. Rabbi Greg Wall expounded in one Rosh HaShana address that Maimonides explains that these sounds recall a weeping, the crying of the soul who had understood that it cannot reach its potential. It is said to echo the sound of Rachel's weeping for her children. She is said to be crying for the lost, for the isolated, and for those of her children who have distanced themselves from the source- and from each other. (Jeremiah 31:15)

The *teruah's nine* sounds are meant to alert us to action. They are reminiscent of a child's halting breath when he stops crying; when he is ready to listen to those around him. It also brings to mind the joyful chuckling of delighted laughter, perhaps Sarai's laugh when she heard that she would conceive.⁴⁹ We hear these sounds and we are called to improve, to live up to the potential G*d infuses nightly into our pure souls.

Tekiah Gedolah is the long wail. It is the sound of commencement. It is the starter noise that insists we rise and act. It requires the person forcing the long, loud yowl from this most ancient instrument to use all the breath inhaled, to extend the sound as long and as loudly as possible. It is the last of the shofar sounds that is blown before continuing a somber conversation with G*d; and the sound that culminates the completion of Yom Kippur. We listen to the *tekiah gedolah* when we are ready to walk into the world, to continue the repentance begun at the hearing of the shofar. The mitzvah of listening to the shofar is endemic to beginning our ever improving year. It is not when we blow the shofar that the call is heard, it is not the sight of the white-clad person raising the twisted ram's horn to awaiting lips. The clarion call must be heard. It must be listened to, it must be obeyed in order for the year to begin well.

The word *vvv* begins with *v* (sh). This sound, in many societies, calls for silence, for quiet. It is in the silence that we can hear in order to listen.

The second sound is *v* (mm). Often this is voiced contemplation, when we are thinking things through. It can be a question, when the end sound rises in tonality, or affirmation when the tone remains steady. It is sounded with closed lips, but with the strength of a full breath.

The third, *v* (aah), often denotes revelation or understanding. Now the lips open, and the breath is released, making the sound of the wind passing through the vitality of the person.

Sh-mm-aah, sit in quiet - to listen, to think, to comprehend, to obey, to hear.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Sarai, Avram's wife was 89 years old when she heard the visitors of G*d saying that she would conceive. She laughed, quietly, chuckling at the prospect that a postmenopausal woman and a man who was so elderly could conceive a child. Genesis 18:12

⁵⁰ At a gathering of educators, the prayer leader began the introduction to *vvv* with these sounds. She was setting an intention (a *kavana*) for the act of responsive listening, for *vvv*

שְׁמַע

Sh'mah

A *midrash*, a retelling⁵¹

We Will Do and We Will Sh'mah

When G*d was determining to whom to gift the Torah, it was presented to all the existent nations, individually. Each nation demanded to know what they would be committing to, if they were to accept.

G*d brought it to the Canaanites and the Hittites. When they discovered the prohibition against stealing and murder, they refused, "How will we survive? Raiding and taking what we need is how we live! We cannot accept this Torah of yours."

Brought to the Moabites and Ammonites, the Torah was refused upon learning the laws against incest. "Our heritage is derived from the union of Lot and his daughters. If we agree to accept this, we are denying our own history!"

Each nation, in turn, found a reason for not accepting this contract, this brit, with the Creator. When G*d presented the Torah to the small Israelite nation, they responded "נְעָשָׂה וּנְשִׁמְעָה" "na'aseh v'nish-mah" (We will do, and we will Listen"). (Exodus. 24:7). Israel received the Torah, and continues to learn, study and teach this awesome guide to life. The Jewish people continue to receive the Torah, each and every time we read this work, when the text is enlivened with voice, whenever we engage with the work, the study, and the words of this gift of G*d.

The root of the word *nishmah* is *sh'mah* שְׁמָה: the prefix ש means "we (first person-plural) will". We will listen, hear and obey.

The first time this root word is encountered is in Genesis 3:8

וַיַּשְׁמַע אָדָם קֹול ה' אֱלֹהִים מִתְהַלֵּךְ בָּغָן לְרוּם הַיּוֹם וַיַּחֲבֹא הַאֲדָם וְאִשְׁתָּוֹ מִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהִים בַּתְּחֵזֶק עַצְמָה:

What Human Heard

They heard the sound of G*d ה moving about in the garden at the breezy time of day; and the Human and his Woman hid from the face of G*d ה among the trees of the garden.

⁵¹ Midrash Sifri, Deuteronomy 343.

Rashi asks “what is it that the humans heard? They heard the sound of the Holy One, blessed be He, as He walked in the garden.”

What that sound is, is unknown. Perhaps it is the sound of footsteps, perhaps the sound of the blowing winds, perhaps the sound of utter silence. What could the Human and the Woman have heard to cause them to choose to hide from G*d, who had created them and blown life into them?

Bereshit Rabbah 19:8 offers a *midrash* as to what the Man and the Woman might have “heard”. They heard [vayishme’u]” **The underlying question here is: It is impossible to understand “the voice of the Lord God” literally, as this would be ascribing physicality to G*d.* – do not read it *vayishme’u*, but rather, *vayashmiu* [they made heard] – they heard the voice of the trees saying: ‘This is the thief who deceived his Creator.’

Another interpretation: They heard the voice of the angels saying: ‘The Lord God is going to those in the garden.’ Rabbi Levi and Rabbi Yitzhak, Rabbi Levi said: [The angels said:] ‘Is the one in the garden to die [met]?’ Rabbi Yitzhak said: Is he to die [met], for having gone off [halakh] on his own way? That is astonishing. The Holy One blessed be He said to them: “With the day breeze [ruah]” – the expansion [revah] of the day. I will make this day alive for them. This is what I said to him: “As on the day that you eat of it you shall die” (Genesis 2:17), but you do not know whether I meant one of My days or one of your days. But I will grant him one of My days, which is one thousand years.’ He lived nine hundred and thirty years, and left seventy years for his descendants...⁵²

The word שָׁמַח translates not as one or the other, hearing or listening, understanding or obeying, but both involuntary and intentional. In the body, breathing is similarly under voluntary and automatic control. The act of שָׁמַח is comparable to breathing, and it is just as necessary to the human. To sh’mah, to hear, is to incorporate learning, to obey, to communicate, to understand that which is required of us by that internalized voice. If you are not changed by what is heard, you have not listened well enough.

“The word, of course, is sh’mah. I have argued elsewhere that it is fundamentally untranslatable into English since it means so many things: to hear, to listen, to pay attention, to understand, to internalize, to respond, to obey. It is one of the motif-words of the book of Devarim, where it appears no less than 92 times – more than in any other book of the Torah. Time and again in the last month of his life Moses told the people, Sh’mah: listen, heed, pay attention. Hear what I am saying. Hear what God is saying. Listen to what he wants from us. If you would only listen ...

⁵² Bereshit Rabbah 19:8.translation by [Sefaria.org](https://www.sefaria.org)

Judaism is a religion of listening. This is one of its most original contributions to civilization.”⁵³

⁵³ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks; The Spirituality of Listening; Covenant & Conversation;Studies in Spirituality • Eikev • 5776, 5783 (<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/>)

ישראל

Israel

Every way of pronouncing this word, and every root word grouping gives ישראל a different nuance, a different way of looking at the ancestor from whom we derive our national identity, and perhaps at ourselves.

A story: Yisrael's Name

“Israel”, as is explained in the Torah, “one who struggles with G*d, and himself”. This interpretation is given in the Torah.

וַיֹּאמֶר לְאֵתָהּ יַעֲקֹב יְאַמֵּר עַזְלֵךְ שְׁמְךָ כִּי אֶמְשָׁרָאֵל כִּי־שְׁרִיבָהּ עִם־אֱלֹהִים וְעִם־אָנָשִׁים וְתִזְקָלֵל:

Said he, “Your name shall no longer be Yaakov, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed.” (Genesis 32:29)

Yaakov sits, alone, by himself the night before he is to meet his brother, Esau. The two had a long and troublesome separation. Yaakov had appropriated the blessing of their father, the blessing promised to the firstborn. Esau deemed this to be his, by right of the first born; a privilege he had previously spurned. Yaakov had sent his family away, for their safety, he was anticipating a violent reunion with his powerful twin brother. He had sent Esau many valuable and valued gifts in order to appease his elder brother's anger.

Yaakov was afraid. Had he wronged his brother, as Esau believed? Had he dishonored his father by his deception? Would he be destroyed by his sins? Would his return be his unmaking? He had worked and travailed for many years to be able to return to his homeland, to his father's house, would he fail? Had the future that was promised by G*d, been lost to his own human flaws?

Alone in the darkness, Yaakov is confronted by his fears. Suddenly, “a man” appears to him. Yaakov is no longer alone. He faces this man and without speaking, without preamble, without words the two begin to wrestle in the dust of the place. They continue throughout the night, neither overcoming the other; intertwining, embracing without releasing each other. They grapple throughout the night until, at the break of the dawn, Yaakov grips the man's thigh. The man demands to be released and Yaakov refuses to let go without first being blessed by his opponent.

The man, at last, responds, “No longer will your name be called ‘Yaakov’ , but ‘Israel’ , for you have wrestled with G*d and with People, and prevailed.”

Yaakov struggles with himself, with others, and with G*d. He presents in the Torah as a person who is constantly yearning and reaching for something just beyond his grasp. In a society where the eldest son is more significant, Yaakov is a second son. He falls in love with a girl and is cheated into forced servitude for over twenty years. His sons are angry, divisive and have endlessly tumultuous relationships. His daughter is attacked and his sons take vengeance beyond what he can find acceptable. He loses his home to famine, his wife to childbirth, his brother and his son to his own decisions, violence and envy. He battles during every episode that the Torah relates to us.

He prevails. He discovers in himself depths and strengths, and he embraces his relationship with G*d and with people. He discovers the relationship with his brother, he finds his lost son, and a way to remember the joy of the wife that he had lost. He finds a way to create a relationship with the G*d of his father and grandfather. **ישראל**, Israel, he who struggles with Man and with G*d - and he succeeds.

Yisar El could be interpreted as “G*d will lead”. The **שורש**, root, **שָׁר** (SAR) is also interpreted as ‘officer’ or ‘leader’. In this way, the Israelites accepted that G*d will be our leader, **שָׁר**. The word shares its root with Sarai’s name and her changed name, Sarah.⁵⁴ Within the name that Israel calls itself, there lives the concept of having G*d as leader. In *Midrash*, God is often referred to as a "King," signifying G*d's ultimate authority and sovereignty over the world, with the key idea being that this "kingship" is not comparable to human monarchs, but rather represents a benevolent and loving ruler who cares deeply for his people. On Rosh Hashanah, we include in the liturgy the words **אָבִינוּ מֶלֶךְנוּ** (*Avinu Malkenu*), “Our father our King”. G*d as leader and parent connotes an intimate beautiful relationship.

A story: Israel's leader; G*d

The first time that the *shoresh* **שָׁר** (as a word, and not a name) is used is in the following passuk;⁵⁵

פָּרָעָה וַיַּחֲלֹל אֶתְּנָה אֶל-פְּרָעָה וַיַּקְרֹב הָאָשָׁה בֵּית פְּרָעָה נִירָא אֶתְּנָה שָׁר;⁵⁶ ⁵⁷

The princes also of Pharaoh saw her, and praised her before Pharaoh: and the woman was taken into Pharaoh’s house.

⁵⁴ We will discuss this interpretation later with regard to Sarah.

⁵⁵ This shoresh is the same as the shoresh of Sarah’s name and will be discussed later in this project.

⁵⁶ Genesis 12:15

⁵⁷ BDB entry- **שָׁר** (n-m) heb :prince, ruler, leader, chief, chieftain, official, captain, chieftain, leader, vassal, noble, official (under king), captain, general, commander (military), chief, head, overseer (of other official classes), heads, princes (of religious office), elders (of representative leaders of people), merchant-princes (of rank and dignity), patron-angel, Ruler of rulers (of God), warden

These princes were the leaders of Egypt, aides to Pharaoh- the then emperor of the known world, leaders or kings in their own right. One of the synonyms of **שָׁרֵךְ** (chieftain) might be **מֶלֶךְ** (king). There is a *midrash* that talks about recognizing G*d as King **מֶלֶךְ/שָׁרֵךְ**.

It is tradition for some people to say **מודה אני Modeh/modah Ani**

מָזָה אָנָי לְפָנֶיךָ מֶלֶךְ טַי וּקְדַם שְׁהַתְּרוּתְךָ בְּנִשְׁמַתְךָ, רַבָּה אַמְנוֹנָתְךָ

“I give thanks to You living and everlasting King for You have restored my soul with generosity. Great is Your faithfulness.”

This prayer of gratitude first appears in the work *Seder haYom* by the 16th century Rabbi Moshe ben Machir⁵⁸. There are several stories in Jewish lore that speak about the legend of this line of devotion.

A Story: The Eternal King

The first Human was created whole, grown, with a strong, lithe, beautiful body. When G*d breathed life into the dust and clay that G*d had formed, speech was also included in the *ruach* **רוֹחַ** (spirit, air, breath, wind) puffed into its nostrils.⁵⁹ The Adam wandered in the garden that was constructed for this creation. It appreciated the beauty and luxury of the Garden of Eden.

As the day wore on, the light intensified, displaying the heavenly grounds with more loveliness. The Human revelled in the every new experiences, encountering the vibrant life in each blade of grass, petals on the individual flowers, the thousands of colors, smells, and textures in the nascent place that G*d had provided for it. The sun continued on its path through the sky, changing the light play altering the view, forming wondrous new views and new colors. This delighted the Human and the soul was overwhelmed by the wonder. Each animal was faced and given a name; the Human recognized the essential nature of each beast and chose a word in *lashon haKodesh* (the Holy Tongue) that would embody that identity.

The Human was then separated; Man and Woman were created to live and tend the Garden. They walked along the paths in the grounds celebrating and delighting in the new experiences. The sun moved lower in the sky and the Man’s vision was dimming. He became concerned, but the new hues made the individuals delight. The garden was darkening, the moon rose in the sky and even more shades tinted the place. Even more

⁵⁸ Rabbi Moshe ben Machir was among the great men of Sefat who lived some 400 years ago. He is best known for his work *Seder HaYom*, printed for the first time in Venice in 5359 (1599). He also founded a yeshiva in the village of Ein Zeitoun, near Sefat.

⁵⁹ This notion is attributed to RamBaN; Moses ben Nachman commonly known as Nachmanides and also referred to by the acronym Ramban.

worrying was the heaviness the Man and the Woman felt. They could no longer play along the trees, run among the grasses, or even walk the clearings. They sat on the soft fine sands, watching their place and the way the light changed what they saw. There were new sounds and smells which they loved, but their bodies grew more and more weak. Finally, their eyelids fell and they lost the life they loved.

Hours passed, and there were new sounds and smells as the sun warmed the place again. The two humans' eyes fluttered open; they took in the fact that after thinking that they had ended their wondrous existence, they had another opportunity, a new day. They rose from their nest. Immense gratitude suffused the Man, HaAdam, and he proclaimed

מָזָה אָנָי לְפָנֶיךָ מֶלֶךְ שֵׁי וּקְבִּים שְׁהַתְּרַתָּ בַּי נְשָׁמָתִ בְּחַמָּלָה, רְבָה אָמִונָתָךְ.

“I am filled with appreciation before You, living and eternal King for You have restored my soul with generosity. Great is Your faithfulness.”

He named G*d as the source of his renewed infusion of his soul, and named G*d King of all life, and welcomed the day with enthusiasm and appreciation. With these words, the Man indicated he would follow G*d as a King’s subject.⁶⁰

אֶל, Israel, G*d will lead

Many people find it difficult to have a personal active relationship with a G*d whose “face is hidden.” The idea that the omniscient, omnibenevolent and omnipotent Deity cares about us individually might be challenging for the modern mind to reconcile. On the other hand, there is an old saying to the effect that there are no atheists in foxholes. When we are in crisis, believing in G*d is not a difficulty, but every day, when the coffee is tasty or the toast is burned, the internet fails, and the printer needs toner, when the fruit flies gather in your basket, and the traffic is just a bit faster or slower than expected. Living each day with a relationship with the Almighty presents many of us with a challenge.

The letter **ו** can be read having the sound of the “s” or the sound of “sh”. The change in pronunciation changes the meaning of the word. The interpretation might be “Straight (directly) to G*d”, אֶל, (*yashar El*), if the “sh” is pronounced. Yaakov had spent much of his life working in the physical world, for material needs, wives, wealth, children. He searched the spiritual roads with difficulty and yearning. Only when he was alone was he able to reach the paths to G*d. When he is by himself, he can find those trails that lead him to where he would like to go.⁶¹

⁶⁰ This is a story I learned as a student from Rabbi Hanania Elbaz *ztz”l*, but have no recollection of the original source of this *midrash*.

⁶¹ Kli Yakar on Genesis 32:29

We can build a direct relationship with G*d. When we declare our allegiance to G*d, we use the deific Name of power, “El”, in the possessive, Our G*d. We hold a path to G*d that is personal, clear, and unequivocal. Our relationships with The Almighty are as direct as we allow them to be, both as a people and individually.

ישראל, Israel; Directly to G*d.

“He (G*d) will sing” יִשְׁרָאֵל, as there are no vowel markings in the Torah, pronouncing “Yashir El” might be a way to say this word. The value of song in Jewish culture is immense. Many of the prayers that Jews recite on a daily basis are actually sung, not spoken. In the Temple in Jerusalem, music was an ever present phenomenon. Melodies were played on lute and harp, trumpets and drum, lyre and flute, strings and cymbals, all in response to the tunes of creation, the music gifted by G*d to the universe.

The Torah sees itself as a type of poetry, a song. Moshe is told, in Deuteronomy 31:22 -

וַיַּכְתֵּב מִשְׁׁה אֶת-הַשִּׁיר הַזֶּה בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא וַיְלַמֵּד אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׁרָאֵל

to write down this *Shira* (song/poem)... to teach it to the people, to put it in their mouths. The word shira may refer to the poem beginning Ha’azinu, (Deuteronomy 31: 1-52) “give ear”, or it may refer to the entire Torah.

Many t’fillot (prayers) are based on the Psalms and some begin with the word שִׁיר, song. The Song of Songs, שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים, is the most evocative, sensual composition in the TaNaCh. Rabbi Akiva, one of the greatest sages said “All of the songs are holy, but Shir HaShirim is the ‘Holy of Holies’. The sages of the Talmud interpreted this holiest of writings as a duet, a song sung by the Nation of Israel, (Israel) and G*d.

Everything in the universe vibrates like a perpetually trembling string of fractals. There are frequencies, resonances and oscillations occurring throughout at a certain frequency, every connection of matter in the universe. The attraction that keeps celestial bodies in their orbits, the constant shifting of waters and land, the microscopic bonds between atoms all harmonize to set and varied wavelengths. Sound, music and noise are, in their essence, vibrations. Physicists have theorized that the basis of the existing universe might be seen through the lens of string theory which proposes that every particle in the universe is made of tiny vibrating strings of energy.

“The idea behind string theory is simple,” says Cremonini. “Look deep inside any particle and you’ll see this tiny vibrating string. This is the fundamental unit we’ve been searching for, the fundamental entity that makes up everything.”⁶²

⁶² <https://news.lehigh.edu/the-vibrating-essence-of-the-universe#>: Sera Cremonini; Posted on: Thursday, February 09, 2017

Music is harmonious and synchronous vibrations. The universe is bound together by music, by song.

Rav Abraham Isaac Kook⁶³ writes in the essay, “The Four-Fold Song,” of levels of the person who sings. The person who sings the song of her soul; she seeks to sing her song, encompassing the entirety of her being, and thus connects to the souls of others. The person who sings the song of humanity: his song elevates the souls even beyond those he encounters directly. His song raises the spiritual connections of all souls. Humanity, and Israel, is the song of G*d. What could it mean to us today, that we call ourselves the Children of Israel, the Nation of the Song of G*d?

ישראל ישראַל Israel, G*d’s song

⁶³ Rav Abraham Isaac Kook 1865-1935 was the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Pre-state Israel, and ardent Zionist and Orthodox rabbi, jurist, poet, community leader and mystic.

ישראל – Israel can be seen as an acronym for all the ancestors' names;

יעקב / יצחק – Yaacov / Isaac

שרה – Sarah

רחל / רבקה – Rachel / Rebecca.

אברהם – Abraham

לאה – Leah

Each of the ancestors is associated with a middah (a Jewish - G*dly value or virtue). Though the Rabbinic sages only endowed the three forefathers with identified middot (plural of *middah*), the middot of the four matriarchs can be seen in their stories. Each of these biblical characters had a particular character trait that was a touchstone – one for which each is known, and revered. I am presenting *midrashim*, ideas and stories that could elucidate these ideas.

ישראל

יעקב

When Yaacov is born he is grasping his twin brother's heel. Yaacov is named for that *Ekev* (heel). The twins were grappling with each other from before birth. Rivka, their mother, was so distressed by their struggles that she went to demand an explanation from G*d. G*d responds to her saying “Two nations are in your womb, two separate peoples shall issue from your body; One people shall be mightier than the other and the older shall serve the younger.”⁶⁴

The relationship with his brother set the course of the Patriarch's life story. Throughout his life, he faced adversity, he struggled with his brother, his father, his uncle, father-in-law, his wives, and his children. He felt alienated from his father, he ran away from his brother's anger, and his mother's love. He was promised one beloved wife and was tricked into marrying another girl. He worked for fourteen years to earn the privilege of marrying those women, to find himself having to work seven additional years for his promised payment. The wife he adored died in childbirth, after years of barrenness. He believes her son to have been killed, then famine forces his family out of his homeland into a heathen place, a place where the foundations of his beliefs would be challenged. Throughout all of these tribulations, Yaacov remains faithful, and resilient.

⁶⁴ Genesis 25:23.

He perseveres in strength and he remains hopeful, seeing G*d's glory in every situation he faces. At each new beginning, Yaakov strives to be the man who can see beyond the current trials, into a beautiful and hope filled future. Yaakov is the only biblical character that keeps using his birth name after it has been changed. Rabbeinu Bachaya (1255-1340) clarifies that Yaakov's name was not *changed* to *Israel*, but that *Israel* was an *additional* name.⁶⁵

When he was "Yaakov" the Kabbalistic quality of Tiferet⁶⁶, harmony with truth and grace in beauty. Of all creatures of this world, only humanity changes the world for only aesthetic reasons, not for reasons of procreation, or shelter, or survival. We change the colors of our world, because we like colors: White and red brick for this house, green and purple shingle for that one. The kitchen in yellow with cream accents and the bedroom in blue with gray, the sailing painting in the living room, and the sunset photograph in the dining room. The act of changing the world for the sake of beauty belongs to humanity, and to the Divine. Is this the attribute that Yaakov exemplifies?

When the angel (man) changes Yaakov's name to **ישראל**, is it possible that not only was he declaring Israel "one who struggles with G*d, and himself", but also infusing this newly reawakened ancestor with the attributes of the previous generations, as well as the present one?

ישראָל:

יצחָק

Isaac, **יצחָק**, represents the attribute of gevurah, resolve, strength, self-discipline, and severity. He is one patriarch whose name does not change; his character does not change; his devotion does not change. He does not leave the land of Canaan. He is nearly, or actually, sacrificed on the altar to G*d, willingly, resolutely.

He and his father travel to the place that will become the holiest place for the Israelites and the Jewish people, to the site of the future Temple Mount. There he discovers that his father is to offer him as a sacrifice to the G*d that no one else in their world worships. Knowing Abraham's level of kindness, Isaac understands the depth of

⁶⁵ Jacob's Three Names; Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein; Ohr Somayach week ending 11 January 2020; <https://ohr.edu/8684>

⁶⁶ "In kabbalistic symbolism, Yaakov represents the attribute of "tiferet." This attribute expresses the harmonious combination of opposing forces ("chessed" and "gevura," or kindness and strict justice), and hence the concept of peace. Yaakov bequeathed to his children the qualities expressed by this trait of "tiferet" – the ability to combine and integrate diverse aspects into a united and harmonious whole in which each finds expression." This is quoted in <https://etzion.org.il/en/tanakh/torah/sefer-bamidbar/parashat-korach/korach-wholeness-yaakov>

his father's faith, examines his own and discovers he believes in the same way, and with the same level of conviction. He asks his father to help him to be an offering, to tie his hands and feet so that he would remain resolute and not allow fear to stop the immense sacrifice. Even an involuntary movement would render the lamb invalid, so he wished to remain absolutely still. Isaac lay upon the mound of wood that he himself had prepared for the offering. Avraham's knife is poised above his throat, Isaac lays upon the altar, disciplined and resolved, his eyes closed to offer what little help he is able to ease his father's conflict.⁶⁷

The strike does not connect. Opening his eyes, Isaac sees Avraham stilled, not moving; and following his father's gaze, he sees a magnificent ram, its horns entangled in the branches of a small bush. It is with a mix of relief and regret that he is released from his bonds and together, they sacrifice the animal in place of the man. He makes his way home to find his mother had died. Isaac's strength and the strength of his faith in G*d, גבורה Gevurah, carry him throughout the rest of his life. It is this aspect of his character that unites him once again with his brother, when they bury their father, together, in the cave Avraham had purchased when Sarah died. His resolute nature, and his faith sustain him when his son, Yaakov, runs away to escape his brother Esau's wrath because Isaac had allowed himself to be fooled into blessing Yaakov.

ישראל:

שרה

Sarah שרה was known for her great and abiding hope, and resolve. This matriarch's name is usually translated as "princess". It is derived from the *shoresh* ש, S.R., which indicates "leader". We are first introduced to her as Sarai, my princess or my (female) leader. Later, G*d makes a tiny and enormous change to her name. The ' (yud) is changed to a ה (hay), transforming her name from "my princess" to "Princess of G*d." or "The princess." By changing their names to reflect a broader leadership and inclusion of the G*dly presence in her mission, G*d imbued Sarah's identity with Divine energy commensurate to her new, more global life-mission.

When her husband was told by G*d to leave his homeland and go from the only home he had ever known to some unknown and undefined place, Sarai goes, unquestioning, for the sake of her love for Avram and her love for G*d. When she can not conceive, she arranges to have a surrogate to bear a child for Avram; to continue his lineage and to encourage him to fulfill his Holy destiny. Sarah gives up much of herself

⁶⁷ Bereshit Rabbah 55-56.

in her resolve to create a People who will carry the relationship with the G*d she and her mate introduce to the pagan world they traverse.

This project is trying to introduce an other way of seeing the texts Jews have studied for millennia. Perhaps there might be a different facet to the perception of Sarah.

Sarah is accused of cruelty when she demands that Hagar and her son Ishmael be sent away. Perhaps she does this for the sake of her newborn son, Isaac. Or, perhaps for the sake of Ishmael. Once a legitimate heir was born, Ishmael, the elder son, would be displaced. Perhaps she saw that it would be a cruelty to him to keep him bound to a place he could have no stake in. Perhaps the act the world views as meanness or resentment, is in fact an act of love for Ishmael. Perhaps we can perceive the generosity in this problematic Matriarch. She knew with certainty, complete faith, that G*d would care for and extend the legacy of both of her husband's sons. She knew, too, that Isaac would be the focus of their people, and perhaps, even his father's attention. Ishmael was older, but still young enough to resent the child that would displace him, and the father that permitted it. Perhaps Sarah saw to it that If Ishmael were to resent someone, it would be herself and not his father or brother. Perhaps Sarah saw that only if Ishmael were out from the relegation to second best, could he thrive, and become the leader he was destined to be.

Abraham perceived Sarah's incredible beauty and, fearing for his own safety, he asked Sarah to claim that she was his sister and not his wife, twice. Sarah's love for her husband, her faith in G*d, and her resolve, her deep inner strength, kept Sarah whole and at peace during these horrifying experiences.

Naamah Adler, in the compilation of modern women's *midrashim*, Dirshuni, writes of the Ten tests of Sarah. Adler explains that just as Avrahm's tests⁶⁸ were to display his *chesed* (loving-kindness), Sarah's were to signify the strength of her resolve and her profound capacity for hope.⁶⁹

ישראל:

רבכה

Rebecca רבקה is the only woman in Torah that makes demand from G*d, and is answered.⁷⁰ She asks G*d for explanation for her pain and difficulties. She is assertive, strong and decisive. A much-maligned figure, Rebecca is often castigated for tricking

⁶⁸ Mishnah Avot 5:3

⁶⁹ Dirshuni 1; unit Matriarchs and Patriarchs 1

⁷⁰ Genesis 25:22-23.

her husband, favoring one son over the other, and engendering a desire for fratricide in Esau, her less beloved son.⁷¹

On the other hand, it is Rebecca who, upon meeting Abraham's messenger Eliezer, takes on the incredibly onerous task of drawing water for a visiting man and his retinue of ten thirsty camels. She does this without being asked. She noticed that the man did not dare to take the liberty of watering his beasts with someone else's water. She gives this stranger water and then his camels because she decides that this is the right thing to do, and she follows through. It is she who decides to accompany Eliezer to her great uncle's settlement so far away.

The text communicates that Rebecca "falls off her camel" ⁷²when she sees Yitzchak walking in the meadow. To our modern, romantic ear, this might suggest that Rebecca had fallen in love at first sight with the man she had promised to marry. Yitzchak, for his part, brings his bride to his mother's tent, falls in love with her, and is finally comforted of the grief of his mother's passing.

It was Rebecca who saw in Yaakov's quiet manner the leadership he would grow into, inspiring generations through hardship and slavery, redemption and sustenance. Esau's devotion to his father and his father's ways masked his ambivalence to the legacy he was in line for, but this mask was no barrier to his mother.

A Midrash based on Midrash DeRebbi Eliezer:

Rebecca's Choice

Our ancestor, Isaac, had grown elderly, his vision was failing and he had few comforts in his life. Isaac loved the fresh game meat that Esau provided. Knowing his death was inevitable, approaching more rapidly than before, he asked his eldest son to hunt for fresh game and make his favorite dishes. Rebecca, overheard her husband's request and told her son Yaakov to serve food that she would prepare, in his brother's stead. Yaakov was reluctant to mislead his father, he knew Isaac's words would have power. He protested to his mother,

"Perhaps my father will curse me when he realizes that I am not my brother"

"His mother said to him: My son! If it be a blessing, may it be upon thee and upon thy seed; if it be a curse, let it be upon me and upon my soul,"

⁷¹ Ibid., 28 and Genesis 27.

⁷² Genesis 24:64

Rebecca realized that Esau would be unable to sustain the faith he was raised in, and she allowed him to choose his own path; even though it might have led to resentment and anger between her two beloved sons. She is decisive in choosing her younger son to be the person that will carry her husband's legacy into the future. Once making a decision, Rebecca follows through with determination, decisiveness, and tenacity.

ישראל:

רחל

The Torah describes Rachel רחל כנינה יפה מראה ויפה מראה as "beautiful of form, and beautiful of appearance"⁷³. She is one who loves fully and inspires love in others.

In Bava Batra 123b, the Talmud relates a beautiful aggadah (telling) of a midrash.

Rachel's Choice

When Yaakov saw the beautiful "Rachel, the daughter of Lavan, his mother's brother... shepherding the sheep of Lavan, his mother's brother... and he gave water to the sheep of Lavan, his mother's brother"⁷⁴ He had already fallen in love with her. He noticed her, that she was gentle with her ovine charges. He watched her and saw her competence and confidence, her leadership and her tranquility. Rachel was lovely, her beauty, demeanor and her breeding (literally and figuratively) caused Yaakov to commit to work for her father for seven years to be able to marry her. Yaakov asked Rachel:

⁷³ Genesis 29:17.

⁷⁴ Genesis 29:10.

“Will you marry me?”

She answered: “Yes, but my father is a deceiver, and you will not be able to best him.”

He asked her: “What is his deceit?”

She told him: “I have an older sister, and he will not allow me to marry before she is wed.”

He said: “I am equal to him, We can defeat him in this.”

Yaakov learned that Lavan would try to switch brides, he gave Rachel secret signs so that he would be able to recognize that it was she, and not her sister. So great was her love for her sister that she allowed not a suspicion of shame to touch her, even to the point of sharing her beloved husband with Leah. The *midrash* says Rachel realized that if her sister were revealed Yaakov might refuse her publicly, it would shame Leah for life. She shared those secrets with her sister, so that would not happen⁷⁵.

Yaakov married both sisters, though it was Rachel whom he truly loved, her children that he treasured, and her love that he mourned when she died in Bethlehem, for the rest of his life. Her heart reaches throughout time, to reach us in our present day. *Midrash* tells the call of Rachel’s cries for her children are echoed in the sounds of the *shofar* we blow every Rosh HaShana, and it is for her sake that G*d is prepared to forgive the transgressions of the Jewish people.⁷⁶

ישראָל:

אֶבְרָהָם

Abraham אֶבְרָהָם is known for the quality of **chesed**, loving-kindness. He rose from his sickbed, recovering from surgery, to tend to men traversing the desert on an unusually hot day. With his own hands, he washed these strangers’ feet, prepared their food, and served it to them.

When these men were revealed to be messengers of G*d, on the way to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham respectfully demands that G*d consider this action. He requires that the towns’ fates be secured by the best of its citizens, for the sake of only ten good people who live there, Abraham asserts that the prophecies’ destruction should be

⁷⁵ Megillah 13b.

⁷⁶ Lamentations Rabbah, Petichta: 24.

averted. “Shall the master of justice be unjust?” For the sake of others, for the sake of kindness, Avraham does battle, even to the point of arguing with G*d; demanding that G*d be just and merciful.

Pirkei Avot, Chapters of the Fathers (Avot 1:5) suggests that Abraham’s tent was unusual in that it had a door on every wall on his tent.⁷⁷ It was made this way in order to allow Abraham to host any passerby, to open his home to any who needed hospitality.

The sages of the Talmud suggest that this *chesed* is the patriarch’s prominent attribute. The word unit חסד is usually interpreted as loving-kindness. It is the attribute of G*d which allows G*d to countenance the many many transgressions, offenses, and rebellions of G*d’s creations. Most *midrashim* and rabbinic explanations of Avraham’s persona define him as a man of *chesed*, a man of a kind and loving nature.

Another way to look at the venerable patriarchs; Zohar Hadash 33b suggests that rather than emblemizing the attribute of loving-kindness, Avraham struggles with it. It suggests that each patriarch and their characteristic facet was not the hallmark of their personality, but the trait that they had to work to reach, the Divine quality that they seek and aspire to emulate. “Each and every one of our *Avot* knew the Holy Blessed One through his own *aspaklariah* (looking glass). Avraham knew Him through *hesed* ... Yitzhak knew Him by the level of *gevurah* ... Yaakov knew Him through the level of *tiferet* ... which is called *emet*, and which unites [the previous two *middot*], as it is written: “You will give *emet* to Yaakov [and You will give] *chesed* to Avraham” (*Micah* 7:20) ... It never states that each forefather mastered, epitomized, or championed these attributes. Rather, it asserts that these virtues were the *aspaklariah*—the looking glass, or windowpane—through which each forefather came to know G-d.”⁷⁸

As I had indicated above, *shorashim* often have disparate and incompatible interpretations. The word *chesed* חסד is found in another context, in which this translation is not fit. In Leviticus 20:17 “וְהִיא־תְּرֵא אֶת־עָרָנָתָךְ הַוָּא...” “...so that he sees her nakedness and she sees his nakedness, it is a disgrace...”. In this *passuk*, this word, *chesed*, is used in the context of a dis-grace, a state of shame, nearly the opposite of the standard translation!

⁷⁷ Bartenura on Perkei Avot 1:5 “**May your home be open wide**”: Like the home of Avraham, our father, may peace be upon him, which was open to the world’s four directions, so that guests would not need to go around to find the entrance.

⁷⁸https://thelehrhaus.com/tanakh/hesed-gevurah-and-emet-do-these-attributes-actually-describe-our-forefathers/#_ftn1 Ben Greenfield - December 8, 2022

ישראָל:

לאה

Leah לאה is the epitome of rachamim, compassion.

We are introduced to Leah after Yaakov met her beautiful, kind, strong, strong-willed sister.

וַיַּלְבֹּן שָׂמֵחַ בָּנוֹת שֵׁם הַגָּדְלָה לֵאָה וַיִּשְׁמַע קְקֻטָּה רָחֵל:

“Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older one was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel

וְעִינֵּי לֵאָה רְקֹות וְרָחֵל הַיְתָה יִפְתַּח-תָּפָר וַיִּפְתַּח מִרְאָה.

Leah had *rakot* eyes; Rachel was shapely and beautiful.”⁷⁹

This word, *rakot* רְקֹות, is often translated as “weak, tender or delicate”. The sages are rather harsh with Leah’s condition.

“She thought she would have to fall to the lot of Esau and she therefore wept continually, because everyone said, ‘Rebekah has two sons, Laban has two daughters — the elder daughter for the elder son, the younger daughter for the younger son.’”⁸⁰

“Some ask, why were Leah’s eyes weak? They raise this question because they believe God’s thoughts are like their thoughts...”⁸¹

Another explanation of the word *rakot* רְקֹות as soft. As Ibn Ezra suggests, Leah’s thoughts and her heart were soft, she was kind-hearted. Her love for the people around her, and her soft-heartedness reflected in her expressive eyes.

Her actions in the stories where she is featured portrays a person who puts others’ needs ahead of her own, without losing her dignity, without denigration of any sort. She feels deeply the hesitation of her husband’s love for her, and the names she gives her sons portray her longing for it. Looking at the *p’shat* (uninterpreted, straightforward) reading of the text would incline the reader to see a very self-involved Leah. Her apparent

⁷⁹ Genesis 29:16.

⁸⁰ Rashi; Genesis Rabbah 70:16.

⁸¹ Ibn Ezra on this Passuk

desperate need for her spouse's attention seems to cause her sons' names to be demonstrative of her own distress. This continues until the birth of her fourth son. "And Rabbi Yoḥanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai: From the day the Holy One, Blessed be He, created the world, no one thanked the Holy One, Blessed be He, until Leah came and thanked Him, as it is stated: "And she became pregnant and gave birth to a son, and she said, 'This time I will give thanks to God,' and thus he was called Judah"⁸²

Another *Midrash* that displays Leah's loving nature:

Leah's Choice

Leah was a prophet. She saw through prophecy that Jacob was destined to father twelve sons. After having six sons and the surrogate wives, Bilhah and Zilpah, the maids who had come with Rachel and Leah from their father's house, had four sons between them; two each. Leah, knowing that sons were a source of honor for women in her world, was concerned that her beloved sister would not merit even the number of sons of the maidservants.

When she conceived again, Leah prayed saying,

"Master of the Universe, if the child within me is a male, my sister will not bear even as many sons as the handmaidens, let me bear a daughter, so that Rachel will have her sons"

The Holy One heard her prayer and transformed the fetus in her womb into a female. In this way, she made it possible for Rachel to mother two sons.⁸³

Despite near constant disappointment, Leah displays understanding and compassion of a type that a mother's body has for the child in the womb. When her better-loved sister asks for the gift Leah's son brings his mother, we see the hurt and dissatisfaction in her response.

"Leah said to her, "Isn't it enough that you took my husband? Would you also take my son's *dudaim* flowers?"⁸⁴

Leah does give the aphrodisiac flowers to her sister, ostensibly in exchange for her turn with their husband. Perhaps, this exchange can be seen through another lens. These gifts from her eldest son showed Leah how much Reuven valued her. Rachel had

⁸² Berakhot 7b

⁸³ Midrash Tanchuma, Vayetzei 8:3 based on Berakhot 60a

⁸⁴ Genesis 30:15.

no children, no one to stop his day's work to think about her enjoyment of a bouquet of flowers, no child to place her on the pedestal that children reserve for their mother. Leah allowed her hurt to break through for a moment, and realizing that she had something her sister had yet to have, and perhaps never would, she decided to share some of her own joy, and her own motherhood. The exchange of their husband's night was, perhaps to allow Rachel to feel that she had given measure for measure; that she had "purchased" the gifts, instead of receiving the charity of her co-wife's gift. This is the level of compassion, honor, and modesty that Leah portrays when we encounter her.

ישראל is perhaps the amalgamation of these qualities; the values of strength, bravery, kindness, compassion, decisiveness, resolve, faith, dignity, beauty, and love. We are a nation that struggles with ourselves and with G*d. We sing and pray that G*d sings with us, fights at our side, and leads us. These are the *middot*, qualities, that the man Yaakov reaches toward; and the people that is the nation Israel strives to emulate and embody.

The Tetragrammaton

Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, Nachmonides or by the Hebrew acronym רמב"ן (RaMbaN), wrote in his preface to his Commentary on the Torah, that "...the entire Torah is composed of the Names of the Holy One- blessed be He."⁸⁵ He explains that every word in the written Torah can be divided into different combinations and numerological calculations to form names of the Divine. G*d is known by many names. The 4-letter name of G*d, the ineffable name, the Tetragrammaton, that name which contains within it only vowel sounds is the name that embodies the Jewish relationship with G*d. This name appears only once humanity appears in the Torah, after the completion of the first story of creation. Prior to the appearance of the thought of creation of Human, the name "Elohim" is used. "Elohim" is often an allusion to the the aspect of Power, the "Nature" aspect of G*d. This name of G*d is the G*d who began and sustains Creation, and because of this, perhaps, Nature is powerful, unpitying, absolute, rigid. Through the first chapter of Genesis, this is the name used for the Creator. When the second chapter begins, when Elohim begins to relate to and with the Creations, G*d's name appears as the ' and ו and ו and ו along with Elohim. This name suggests eternity, transcendence, relationship.

This name of G*d is made up entirely of vowel letters, the sounds of wind, spirit, or breath, the same breath that G*d breathed into the nostrils of the first human. This is the name that Midrash associates with the Divine attribute of Mercy. This G*dly attribute stands opposed to the attribute of Justice and Power, alluded to within the name "Elohim". It is only Mercy which allowed the flawed human to be created into the perfect creation of the Almighty. This is the name that G*d uses with Moshe, and not with the forefathers. It is the name of action, the name of being and becoming, the name of Relationship. It is the name that alludes to a timeless and melding of time. The Hebrew words for past, present, and future sense of being ייְהֹה, הָיָה, (Haya, Hoveh, Yihiyeh). This Name of G*d combines these relative times, and presents a melding of the sense of both time's incessant passage and times' irrelevance to G*d.

The correct pronunciation of this name of G*d has been lost, or hidden. Rather than risk an improper enunciation of G*d's holy name, the sages determined that the word "Adonai" would be used. (Mishnah Sotah 7:6; Mishnah Tamid 7:2) says, "In the Sanctuary the name of God [in the three blessings, *Num. vi. 24-26*] is to be pronounced in the Priestly Benediction as it is written, but outside the Sanctuary it must be given the

⁸⁵https://www.sefaria.org/Ramban_on_Genesis%2C_Foreword.14?ven=hebrew|Vocalized_Edition&lang=bi

Ramban on Genesis, Foreword

Charles B. Chavel. Shilo Pub. House, 1971-1976

paraphrastic pronunciation. Adonai literally means Lord or Honored leader. It acknowledges the idea that G*d is our leader, that we who worship G*d are responsible to and responsibilities of G*d.

The word Adonai also shares its root with the word אֶדְן (eden), threshold or sill. This is a structure on the entrance to a room that will keep what is in the room from spilling out, a frame that permits entry, and yet sets limits upon it; a container.

There is a Kabbalistic notion that suggests that G*d is whole, complete, entirety. The phrase "Ein Od Milvado" (There is nothing besides Him) isn't from a single verse in the Zohar, a Kabbalistic foundational text. It is determined as a profound Kabbalistic interpretation notably, Deuteronomy 4:35

אָתָּה קָרָאת לְדֹעַת כִּי הִיא הָאֱלֹהִים אֵין עוֹמֵד בָּבוֹן “

“You have been shown that you might know that HaShem, He is *the* G*d; there is no god other than He.”

and Isaiah 45:5,

אָנָּה הִיא אֵין עוֹד זָוֵחַ אֵין אֱלֹהִים אֶאָזְרָה וְלֹא יַדְעַתִּי:

“I am HaShem and there is none else; Beside Me, there is no god. I will help you, though you have not known Me,”

These verses emphasize a Divine oneness that would either exclude the creations from G*d, or, as the midrash suggests, make the creations parts of the G*d, pieces of the whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

The name/ title “Adonai” hints that G*d is the container, the vessel which encompasses and shapes the whole of eternity.

The Divine

“Elohenu” is the plural possessive of the name of G*d, “Elohim” ⁸⁶ אֱלֹהִים. It is this name that the Torah uses as the first introduction to G*d. “Elohim” is the Name of G*d that created the universe, it is in this Name that the Torah states that spoke Light into being, that named Day, that separated the waters, that caused the insects and animals to live, and that decided to form Human in the image of the image-less G*d. The name אֱלֹהִים has the connotation of energy, Power, that unfathomable impelling force that sets the universe into motion.

The latter part of the word, (nu) נָנוּ, indicates the first person plural possessive, that is, “our”, aligned with or belonging to us. In the affirmation, We declare, to the world and to ourselves, that the G*d that created the universe, created humanity, and gifted the world with the Torah that G*d is Our’s; not that we “own” G*d, but that we affiliate, and have a direct relationship with אֱלֹהִים. We declare that we will worship, serve, and have loyalty for, only the true G*d, and no other.

In order to find possible שָׁרֶשׁ, root words, we eliminate the vowel sounds. Once we do, we are left with הָם אֱלֹהִים. The word is often viewed as a plural presentation. The מִם (eem) suffix is usually translated as a masculine or general plurality⁸⁷.

Is it possible to view this Name as a prepositional phrase? The word אֱלֹהִים can mean “G*d” and power, force or energy, it might also mean “to” or “toward”. The word הָם means “them”. Is it possible to view G*d, אֱלֹהִים El-hem, as “toward them,” whomever “them” is? Can we include ourselves in “them”? If G*d is not a noun, how does that change our understanding of ourselves? Of others? Of the universe? Of G*d?

⁸⁶This presentation of G*d’s Name uses the accurate letters, but I have separated the word to show respect and keep the sounds accurate- in other places, the spelling of the Name is changed, for the same reason.

⁸⁷Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar, §124 n: The Various Uses of the Plural-form. I a 1. The plural is by no means used in Hebrew solely to express a number of individuals or separate objects, but may also denote them collectively. This use of the plural expresses either (a) a combination of various external constituent parts (plurals of local extension), or (b) a more or less intensive focusing of the characteristics inherent in the idea of the stem (abstract plurals, usually rendered in English by forms in -hood, -ness, -ship). A variety of the plurals described under (b), in which the secondary idea of intensity or of an internal multiplication of the idea of the stem may be clearly seen, is (c) the pluralis excellentiae or pluralis maiestatis

אחד

Eikhad

One, The number one is the first in the numerical system, as it is in Hebrew. This is among the many names of G*d. **אחד** shares its root with the word **团结**, “together”, or “united”, as One.

A Midrash:

Becoming One

G*d created the Human on the sixth day. Human was created masculine and feminine. Sages suggest that this particular person was a unified person, both male and female. This Human was One. He/she was in the image of G*d, a unique being, a self sufficient one. The nature of the Human was not One.

“It is not good that Human is being (by) itself, I will make for it a mirror-helper.”⁸⁸

Therefore G*d separated the soul into two. Each human soul was apportioned into two. The twain search through time and space to find the other half; their soulmate; when they unite, they become One.

על-כן יעזב-אִישׁ אֶת-אָבִיו וְאֶת-אָמָּה וְרַבֵּק בְּאַשְׁתָּו וְהַיּוּ לְבָשָׂר אֶחָד:

Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and cleave to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.⁸⁹

אחד also connotes uniqueness. The Torah begins with the story of the creation of the universe. The initial act of creation ends with the words “**וַיְהִי־עָרֵב וַיְהִי־בָּקָר יּוֹם**” “And there was evening, and there was morning- Day One”. This is the only day not named with an ordinal name, not the First day, but ‘Day One’. The actions of this “day” will and can never be repeated or duplicated. It is unique. The indivisible, ineffable, indescribable G*d is without equal, without division, One, unique, complete, without beginning or end, no other.

⁸⁸ Genesis 2:18

⁸⁹ Zohar; 91b on Genesis 2:24.

שמע ישראל ה' אלקינו ה' אחד

Listen - hear - know - agree - obey - embody, the People - Nation - Individual who struggles, sings, follows, leads with resolve straight to the breath of life, the Name of mercy, G*d, toward them, the G*d of humanity, of the creative force, energy, power, Our G*d of Relationship - Named Merciful - generous - Life-giving, G*d of memory, imagination, anticipation, action is whole - complete- unique - One.

The next line is usually recited in an undertone;

ברוך שם כבוד מלכותו לעולם ועד

Baruch Shem Kevod Malkhuto l'olam Va'ed

This particular line does not appear in the Torah. The line is often translated as “Blessed be the Name of His Glorious kingdom forever and ever”. What name? Which kingdom? What is the Glory that has a name? What is its name? Are we blessing a name? A kingdom? G*d? Are we, in fact, blessing G*d?

What does this line have to do with the most ubiquitous line in the Jewish world?

There are a number of stories that illustrate its origin, and the way we use it. One midrash appears above, in the story of Israel's death. The Patriarch Jacob could not allow himself to die with the weight of the fear that his relationship with G*d would end with him. His children, witnessing their father's pain, proclaimed together their shared belief and relationship with the G*d of their father. They would pass this legacy to every subsequent generation. In this story, they did not use the name Jacob, nor the title Father, but the name Israel. The name of the people that are the legacy of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob/Israel. When he heard their words, Israel uttered this passuk in his final breath.

Another midrash of this passuk, based on Devarim Rabbah 2:36:

Overhearing Angels

When Moshe went to the summit of Sinai, he glimpsed the realm of Heaven. Surrounded by G*d's light he watched the angels' joyful work. As they sang, they would punctuate their hymns with the words ברוך שם כבוד מלכותו לעולם ועד “*Baruch Shem Kevod Malkhuto le'Olam Va'ed*”. Moshe found the line beautiful. He found the purity and the radiance with which the angels sang uplifting. He wanted that enthusiasm for his own charges, for B'nei Yisrael. He “stole” it and brought it down to earth. He gave it to the elders of Yisrael, they then positioned it in the national proclamation, *Sh'mah Yisrael HaShem El-o-haynu HaShem Echad*. Because Moshe had taken this from the heavenly realms, like a precious gem, the humans kept the statement close to the heart. The elders recited it in an undertone, as we continue to do today. Only on Yom Kippur, when the prayers of B'nei Yisrael reach into Heaven, and the people of our nation reach the level of Angels, only on this day do we declare this line aloud.

On Yom Kippur we recite a litany of the rituals that were performed at the Mishkan and the Beit HaMikdash, the “Holy Temple”. The rituals are described in great

detail, the rituals of bathing, of cleansing, of clothing, of sacrificial rites, of rebathing, reclothing the High Priest (*Cohen Gadol* כהן גדול until he was in readiness to face G*d's awesome presence in the “Holy of Holies” (*Kodesh HaKodashim* קודש הקודשים); the inner sanctum where the Holy Ark containing the original Tablets of the Covenant. Only on this day was the *Cohen haGadol* permitted to enter this area, and only he could pass over the threshold of this chamber.

The high priest spoke the name of G*d on the Day of Atonement in his recitation of the communal confession of sins; “and when the priests and the people in the great hall heard him utter the ‘*Shem ha-Meforash*,’ (The Explicit Name) they prostrated themselves and glorified G*d, saying: “Praised be the glorious Name of His kingdom for ever and ever.”⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Mishnah Yoma 6:2.

ברוך

Baruch

Baruch, This may be the most used word in T'fillah, in prayer. It is often interpreted as "blessed". The English word "Bless" is defined as the bestowal of divine favor, or good of any kind. It is first used in the story of creation, after the creation of the first living creatures. It is the same blessing G*d speaks to the animals, and to the Humans. "And Elokim blessed them, saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply...'"⁹¹ Baruch enters the world when life enters the world. G*d promises Avram, when he embarks on his journey to Canaan, to "Bless those who bless you...and you shall be a blessing". Baruch comes to Life as they come into the universe, and to time when G*d creates Shabbat. "And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy"⁹²

When the word "baruch" begins every blessing, it is an adjective. When we recite any given blessing, are we actually blessing G*d? Or are we recognizing and acknowledging that The Divine One is the source of life, and all that is needed for life to subsist?

There is a concept that a Jew recites one hundred blessings every day. Moshe asks the nearly rhetorical question of the Israelites, "What (מה) (mah) does G*d ask of you?" The Talmud, a codification of the "oral law" (Menachot 43b) explains that *mah* can be read as *me'ah*, hundred. The sages understand this to allude to the answer to a part of Moshe's question, one hundred b'rachot. The traditional daily liturgy provides an arrangement to recite at least one hundred. These b'rachot recognize every aspect of life, to awaken, the ability to see, to dress, to stand on ground that does not shift or sway, to evacuate wastes from the body, the sun, moon and planets' orbits, the changing of the seasons, the foods we eat, our history and the capacity to learn it. Each of these and many others have had b'rachot written by sages. We are not limited to these, nor are we enjoined from making our own endorsements of the blessings that the Source has bestowed on us.

When one asks many Hebrew speakers how they are, many will respond with ברוך השם. The phrase indicates that all is well with them and for this, they are thanking the Almighty G*d. They "bless" the name of the source of blessings for all the experiences and blessings in their lives.

The word ברוך shares its root, שורש, with the word for knee, ברכ (berech). The knee bends in gratitude and supplication when speaking to the Almighty Creator. G*d

⁹¹ Genesis 1:22.

⁹² Genesis 2:3

blessed the original living beings, generated by the Word of the One. The blessing of “be fruitful and multiply “ was bestowed on the flying, creeping and crawling creations then later, walking, the living things that received were those able to bend, and to Bless.

Rabbi Goldie Milgram has often begun her b'rachot with “Bending my knee at the pool of Blessing...” ⁹³

Rabbi Yitzchak Friedland, learned from Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch, who mentioned that the concept of בָּרָךְ is the passageway that the water takes to come to the surface from the source. It is not indicative of the water, but rather the trough that water takes to get to where it needs to be. Water is often equated with life. בָּרָךְ is the course that causes the water of life to arrive from the source, G*d, to a place where our soul can reach it. When we recite a brachah, we are acknowledging the idea that G*d is the originator of all life, and all the needs of life are fulfilled through this attentive and generous source.

⁹³ This was a private communication Summer 2015

Shem

“What’s in a name? That which we call a Rose by any other name would smell as sweet.”⁹⁴

When Juliet muses about what is in a name, she is suggesting that a name has no significance. The rose would not change if we called it something else. Random House Webster’s College dictionary defines *name* as a word or phrase by which a person or thing is designated; clan or family; a reputation.

The first time the word “name,” שם, is used in the Bible is with regard to the name of a river. It gives a description of the placement of the Garden of Eden. The name of the river which encircles the garden where Humanity was to begin the fateful story and where the journey of history emanates.

The Torah often tells us not only the name given to a person but also the reason for it and significance behind it. A Midrash in Kohelet Rabbah says that everyone has a name; really:

What is your name, truly?

A person carries three names.

One name is given by parents in infancy. They think, dream, and worry over this name. Will this baby be named for Grandmother Rose, Great-Grandfather Daniel, Uncle Morris or a new name with no history? How will this baby bear this name? Will our family name uplift or hold back this growing child? This is the name this child will carry throughout life. The names we are given at birth are not accidental. There is a legend that when a baby is gestating, an angel teaches the fetus everything there is to know. When it comes time to name the child, the angel whispers a name to the parents. If they’re listening, they give the perfect name for this babe.

The second name is the one that people know. As a person grows there are friends, colleagues, schools, jobs, everyone finds a name among them. It is the name that society views, the name that reflects what other people see. This name reflects behavior, what is displayed to the world.

The third name is the one a person acquires for oneself. This name is not given by other people; not parents, not friends, nor even by angels. This third name a person

⁹⁴ Shakespeare, William. *Romeo and Juliet*, Act II, Scene II.

sees oneself. It is an internal expression, one born of experiences, emotion, life. This name is not fixed, it shifts, it evolves, it alters throughout one's life. These three names a person carries into the next life.

In the Torah, names are immensely significant. The very first task set to the first human was to give a name to each living creation. G*d caused every beast of the field and every bird in the sky to pass before the Human, and whatever the First Person would call it would be its name.⁹⁵ The First Person is not given a name in the Torah, merely HaAdam - The Human. He names the creations of G*d, and only after the making of HaAdam does G*d use the ineffable four-letter name. HaAdam gives the woman her name, Chava, mother of Living things. Names given to the people in the Torah have meaning, and when names are changed, there is meaning as well. Avram's name is changed to Avraham and his spouse, Sarai to Sarah, Yaakov to Israel, Hoshea to Yehoshua. Moses' name was supposedly changed from Yoachim to Moshe and Solomon from Yedidya. Each of these names carry significance and the individuals grow into the persons they were meant to be.

G*d's Name:

The Tetragrammaton, the ineffable four-letter name of G*d, is now considered to be unpronounceable, or forbidden to be uttered lest one use it "in vain." Many people will use the term "HaShem", literally the Name. It is a reference to the name of the unutterable Divine. Giving G*d the designation of "Name," connotes a meaningfulness and a reputation, a personhood to a being without solidity and form. When Moshe meets G*d at the Burning Bush, he asks, "When (the children of Israel) say to me. 'What is His Name?' - What shall I say to them?" Moshe needs G*d's name in order to convince the children of Israel that this is the G*d of the ancestors, that the Deity of the lineage they revere is the same G*d who will rescue them from their horrific state of slavery in Egypt. The response is an explanation of divine time "Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh" (I will become that which I am Becoming) and the words

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל-מֹשֶׁה אֶתְנָה אֲשֶׁר אָתָּה וַיֹּאמֶר כִּי תֹאמֶר לְבָנַי יִשְׁרָאֵל אֶתְנָה שְׁלֹתָנִי אֶל-יכֶם:

'And God said to Moses, "Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh." He continued, "Thus shall you say to the Israelites, 'Ehyeh (I will be) sent me to you.'"⁹⁶

The question that Moshe poses demands from G*d a designation, a recognizable authority, one that the Israelites will be able to follow into the unknown. G*d gives

⁹⁵ Genesis 2:19.

⁹⁶ Exodus 3:14.

Moshe the name that represents a euphemism for the future; as G*d is “becoming” so the Israelites are “becoming”. It’s all in the Name.

כָּבוֹד

Kavod

This root word, **כָּבוֹד** (*K/KH.B/V./D*) has many interpretations. Oxford English-Hebrew dictionary will define it as liver (the body part) and, difficult, burdensome, weighty, and honor, respect, glory, wealth, and grace. In American lore, describing someone as “lily-livered” is to call them a coward. If a liver is white, devoid of blood, a person lacks fortitude, strength, and resolve. Torah texts use the **כָּבֵד** (root) with many interpretations, varied translations.

- Avram relocated from Canaan because the famine was **כָּבֵד** (*kaved*) (heavy) on the land (Genesis 12:10).
- Avram was **כָּבֵד** (*kaved*) (wealthy) with cattle, silver and gold (Genesis 13:2).

Avram left his homeland, the land of his birth, his father’s house. He was directed to the land that G*d showed him, to the Land of Canaan. The place was lush and verdant. He wandered the country until the Lord told him that his wanderings should cease, and he settled in that land. He traded with and became known to the native clans as a wealthy and knowledgeable sheep, goat, and cattle herder, his flocks flourished in the land that would become the homeland to his future generations. As time passed, the rains fell less and less. The grasses that fed the massive herds of the native Peoples and Avram found himself wandering again, this time in search of the increasingly rare precious water that sustains life. Finding himself in the midst of a hard and unforgiving drought, the still wealthy Avram took his herds, his silver, gold and his knowledge to the empire of Egypt. There he hoped to remain until the rains would return to the Promised land.

- Now he was the most **כָּבֵד** (*nekhvad*) (esteemed) in his father’s house (Genesis 34:19).

The king of the town of Schem had many children. Schem was a favored son in his father’s household, so favored that the town itself bore his name. Nothing was withheld from the boy, even less from the man he had grown to be. He only had to express the hint of a desire, and his father Hamor, did everything in his considerable powers to get it for him. ⁹⁷

⁹⁷ This is a retelling based on the *midrash* in Sefer HaYashar; Book of Genesis, *VaYishlach* 6

- I am **קָבֵד** (*kaved*) (slow) of speech and **קָבֵד** (*k'ved*) (slow) of tongue” (Exodus 4:10).

A retelling of a Midrash⁹⁸

Light or Lisp:

Moshe was a baby, in the house of the daughter of Pharaoh. An engaging child, the king delighted in playing with him. The boy would laughingly grab at his foster grandfather's crown, placing it on his own head. The king would roar with laughter as the baby would try to balance the beautiful coronet on his head. Pharaoh's advisors insisted that the infant was a danger, that the stars had predicted that he would defeat the monarch, and perhaps destroy the very empire. They said the boy's game was an indicator; that Moshe would one day take the Crown of Egypt. Pharaoh laughed at the notion.

“He's an infant, attracted to any shining thing.”

In order to pacify his advisors, the king set up a test for the babe. He had two servants bring his own golden, bejeweled crown placed on a metal plate, and a brazier with a brightly luminous coal. They set their burdens on the floor and Pharaoh placed the infant Moshe before the two shimmering plates.

“If he reaches for the crown, he will show himself to know the difference between the Gold of the crown and the golden color of fire.” he said to his apprehensive counsel, “Therefore if he reaches for the crown, you may put him to the sword.” Then in a hard, thunderous voice he commanded, “But if the boy reaches for the coal, it will be clear that he is delighted only by the bright colors and light, If he reaches for the coals, no more will be said of this!”

Moshe sat facing the new toys, and hesitantly began to reach for the heavy crown. Suddenly the angel Gabriel appeared to the child alone and pushed the tiny hand away from the deadly headdress and Moshe grasped the smoldering coal. Startled by the unexpected pain, Moshe brought his fiery fingers to his mouth, burning his tongue and lips. After that, Moshe had trouble with speaking. He was “slow of speech and slow of tongue “ **קָבֵד** (*kaved*) (slow) of speech and **קָבֵד** (*k'ved*) (slow) of tongue.

⁹⁸ Midrash Shemot Rabbah 36.

A Story based on Exodus 3:1-17:

Moshe's "Heavy" Tongue

Moshe had escaped from his princely home in Egypt to the desert of the Midianites, he was guilty of killing an Egyptian overlord, and there he would be killed for that crime. There he was embraced by the Priest, Jethro, and he worked with the desert dwellers. He was so welcomed into their society that he came to marry Zipporah, the Midianite priest's daughter. He worked as a shepherd among the people.

Moshe was tending his flock of sheep one day on the lush pastures of The G*d's mountain **הר האלוהים** (Har HaElohim). He realized that one of the younger sheep was missing, He left the herd and climbed up the mountain searching for the missing lamb. When he found the young animal, it was trying to reach a small spring that had bubbled up among the rocks. He gently gathered it in his arms, and gave it water, petting it so that it could drink its fill, and not be frightened.

On his return, he saw an amazing sight. Flames danced on the branches of a tree, he felt the light and heat of the fire, but the branches were whole and green, not withering or darkening. He turned around, he stopped, and examined the marvel before him, and there he heard the command,

“Do not approach nearer, remove your shoes from upon your feet, for the ground upon which you stand is Holy”

G*d had chosen Moshe to be the representative who would save the Israelites from the slavery of Egypt. The Holy One spoke with, cajoled and argued with Moshe, convincing him to go to Egypt as G*d's representative to free the enslaved people. The final argument that Moshe used to try to abdicate this responsibility was the difficulty of his speech. I am **כַּבֵּד** (slow) of speech and **כַּבֵּךְ** (heavy) of tongue.

- Go to Pharaoh. For I have **הַכְּבָדָתִי** *hichbadeti* (hardened) his heart and the hearts of his courtiers (Exodus 10:1).

Pharaoh's heart

Moshe went to Pharaoh at G*d's behest. He demanded that Pharaoh let the slaves travel out to the desert to worship the G*d of their fathers. Pharaoh refused. He then increased the difficulty for the slaves. Moshe returns again to the King of Egypt only to be rebuffed again. Each visit ended with Moshe implementing G*d's plan for retribution, one plague after another. The mighty river Nile transformed from the clean fresh water into a river of blood. The amphibious life of the river departed from their normal course and invaded the villages and homes of the people. Insects follow them, covered the land with a roaming carpet of arthropods, climbed into bedding, clothes, and food containers. Before each time, Moshe visits Pharaoh, each time the king concedes and then reneges on the command to release the enslaved people.

Moshe returned to the mountain where he had another conversation with the Lord. G*d explains what will happen, the plagues will be followed by Pharaoh's acquiescence then the cancellation of his release. The Almighty explains to Moshe that "For I have **הכבדתִי** (hardened) his heart and the hearts of his courtiers".

This **הכבדתִי** is often interpreted as "I will Harden". This is only one interpretation of the word. The **שׁוֹרֶשׁ** might also be translated as 'make heavy'. What might it mean for Pharaoh to have a heavy heart, a euphemism for sadness? Pharaoh is the king of the mightiest empire of the known world. He himself is a god of Egypt. How could a small contingent defeat a god of the most powerful kingdom? This might burden the heart of a king.

Another meaning of **הכבדתִי** (*hichbadeti*) might be 'I will strengthen'. Might it be that G*d is saying that Pharaoh will have cause to become strong, to overcome any hesitation, and to keep his empire complete and productive.

The word **הכבדתִי** can also be understood as 'I will honor'; that G*d will honor. To honor a person's heart might mean to allow them to fulfill their truest desire. Might it be that G*d is explaining to Moshe that Pharaoh will act in a manner that is contrary to his own wishes? Perhaps to honor Pharaoh's heart means that G*d will allow the king to strengthen his resolve, to make him sad, and to allow Pharaoh to make the decision that he really wished to make, to keep the Israelites enslaved.

- **כְּבָד** (*Kabed*) (honor) your mother and your father (Exodus 20:12).

Kavod;

Bridging Relationships:

The pivotal event of the Israelite travails was the revelation at Mount Sinai. The escaped slaves had gathered at the base of a small mountain in the depths of the desert. The mountain had not been particularly significant when they first set up their encampment; just an ordinary bluff located in the wilderness. Three days pass and the mountain transforms. Flowers bloom, engulfing the mound with vibrance, life, and color. The peak of the mountain is enshrouded with fog, smoke, and fire. Winds buffet the place, lightning sounds through the camp, and thunder flickers surround the smoking hill.

Moshe descended for the second time, carrying the revealed word of G*d, engraved upon two stone tablets. Word by Word, the Children of Israel heard the list of Utterances of the Almighty. The words that would eventually become known as “The Ten Commandments”. The first Tablet enumerated the special relationship that the people would have with G*d, the second listed laws that would ensure a stable society. The fifth commandment, perhaps, creates a bridge between the two sections, the law to Honor, respect, hold tight to one’s Father and Mother.

- He said, “Oh, let me behold Your **כָּבֵד**” (Exodus 33:18).

Kavod;

Glory:

Moshe had led the Israelites out of Egypt, released from the bondage of their pagan overlords, and through the wilderness. He shepherded them across the Yam Suf, the sea which had split and then came crashing down on the chariots of the greatest empire of the time. He rejoiced with song and dance on the opposite side of the water. He had encamped the people by the mountain he ascended, The desert hill was in full bloom and enshrouded by fog, smoke, and clouds. He watched as the finger of G*d incised the stone and detached tablets of the Covenant. He listened as the Lord explained the law, and the rules of life elucidated in the gift of the Torah. He descended accompanied by Joshua, Moshe’s protegee, to witness the revelry of the Israelite descent of a pagan worship of a golden idol. Incensed, Moshe hurled the divinely constructed stones down among the people and then collected those who remained loyal to the worship of the Almighty. He climbed to the summit again to argue with and cajole G*d to give the nation another chance, to come close again to the G*d that saved them from slavery.

“The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as one man speaks to another.” ⁹⁹ They spoke together in the Tent of Meeting, a place that would emit a light when the Shekhina (the Divine Presence) inhabited the tent. Moshe asks ,“He said, “**וַיֹּאמֶר הָרָאָנִי בָּא אַתְּ כָּבֵד**” “ Oh, let me behold Your **כָּבֵד**: (Presence or sometimes interpreted as Glory)!”

“G*d tells Moshe “You cannot see My Face, no man can see My Face and live.” .

כָּבֵד, honor, weight, heaviness, strength, Presence, Glory, slow, favor.

In Hebrew, a noun precedes any adjective; sometimes, a noun precedes another noun, which may indicate that the first noun is taking the role of an adjective, describing the second noun in some way. The following sentence often translates the word **”כָּבֵד”** as the glory or honor of (**מַלְכוֹתָו**, *malchuto*) Kingdom.

⁹⁹ Exodus 33:11

מלכותו

Malchuto

Malchuto is translated as “kingdom” or “majesty” What is the Kingdom of G*d? The root word of Malchuto is מלך Melech. There are many references to G*d as “king” in liturgical texts. Most blessings, *b'rachot*, contain the phrase “*Melech ha Olam*” מלך העולם “King of the Universe” .

The first time we encounter מלך, the שרש of מלכותו, is Genesis 14:1,

וַיְהִי בִּימֵי אָמְרָפֵל מֶלֶךְ-שָׁנָר אַרְיוֹן מֶלֶךְ אֶלְעָסָר כָּרְלָעָמָר מֶלֶךְ עַיִּים וְתַּדְּעַל מֶלֶךְ גָּוִים:

Now, when King Amraphel of Shinar, King Arioch of Ellasar, King Chedorlaomer of Elam, and King Tidal of Goiim

עָשָׂו מֶלֶחֶתְּה אֶת-בֶּרֶע מֶלֶךְ סָדָם וְאֶת-בְּרַשְׁעָמָלֶךְ עַמְּרָה שְׁנָאָב וְמֶלֶךְ אַדְמָה וְשֵׁמְאָכָר מֶלֶךְ צְבִיִּים [צְבּוּיִם] וְמֶלֶךְ בְּלָע הַיָּאָצָר:

made war on King Bera of Sodom, King Birsha of Gomorrah, King Shinab of Admah, King Shemeber of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela, which is Zoar,

These refer to human rulers of human kingdoms.

The first reference to G*d as King is as the Song Of the Sea sung by Moshe (Exodus 15:18).

ה' יְמַלְּךָ לְעוֹלָם וְעַד: (Yimlokh)

The LORD will reign for ever and ever!

A story;

Nachshon; the First to Step¹⁰⁰

The children of Israel had experienced the Exodus from Egypt after generations of slavery to this immense world power. The many plagues had weakened Egypt, both their strength and their resolve, but the Pharaoh decided to chase and recapture these escaped chattels. The armed might of Egypt mounted on iron chariots pulled by powerful horses

¹⁰⁰ This is a retelling of the midrash in Kedushat Levi, Exodus, Beshalach Kedushat Levi translated by Rb. Eliyahu Munk: It is based on the Talmud Bavli; Sotah 37a:3

pursued the Israelites through the harsh wilderness of the desert. The terrified former slaves stood between the ravaging Egyptian cavalry and a raging sea.

Suddenly a young man leapt into the surging waters. Step by step, singing of G*d's attributes, he moved forward his ankles, knees, thighs, belly chest, then his neck submerged beneath the waves. He continued his song even when the water filled his mouth. The east wind blew powerfully reaching through the waters, lifting and holding the waves as two walls of water formed, the young man stood in the center of the formerly water laden place. The Israelites surged forward, walking on dry land, on what had recently been covered with an unapproachable sea. They traveled between fortifications of water, miraculously frozen into shape.

Having traversed through the treacherous Egyptian landscape, the perilous desert, and now through the unlikely experience of a miraculously dried river, the Israelites turned to see the vaunted Egyptian military mired in the returning waters of the sea. The chariots stuck fast in the mire, the horses bound to the iron rigs submerged beneath the rising waves. This vision so exulted the former slaves, now the Nation of Israel, that Moshe began to sing a song of praise. Accompanied by his prophetic sister, Miriam's timbrels, he sings of the might and miracles which had saved his people, of the reputation G*d had now attained among the nations of the area, declaring that not only was Israel a nation, this nation would throughout eternity be under the guidance and sovereignty of the Holy One;

“G*d will reign throughout space and time.”

ה' ימָלֵךְ לְעוֹלָם וְעַד:

If G*d is King, where is his kingdom? Is the material world the Kingdom of G*d? The known universe? Any particular nation? The Children of Israel? Is it a physical place? A place of the soul? A place of mind? Is The Kingdom of G*d only G*d's? Can we, as humans, inhabit that place in any way? In what way?

בְּרָאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹקִים אֶת הַשָּׁמָן וְאֶת הָאָرֶץ:

When G*d began to create heaven and earth.¹⁰¹

G*d made the physical and spiritual universe, does that not make G*d it's ruler? Is that the same as being its king מלך?

אָבִינוּ מֶלֶכְנוּ “Our Father, Our King” (Avinu Malkenu). We acknowledge G*d as emperor and as parent. The parent, representing

¹⁰¹ Genesis 1:1.

that aspect of G*d that cares for and returns our love; the monarch, representing the aspects of G*d as judge and leader. The reference to G*d as King places the notion as a king in a non-spiritual, nearly secular sense. If G*d is a king, what does the spiritual or religious rule mean? Is there a difference? If there is no difference between secular and religious, does that mean that every monarch is also a religious leader, chosen by G*d? Representing G*d? Replacing G*d?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in *Lessons in Leadership* speaks about the difference between the leadership of Moshe, the secular leader, the Prophet, and the leadership of his brother Aaron, the spiritual leader, Cohen Gadol, priest. Which brother represents the “Kingdom of G*d”? The rule-maker or the soul-guide? Moshe or Aaron?

Perhaps the concept of a “kingdom” is not the realm of place, perhaps it lies in the ideas of time. Is G*d’s Kingdom an aspect of time? G*d is traditionally viewed as outside of the influence of the passage of time. Time is a concept introduced in the Torah from its Genesis. If there is a beginning then does it not follow that there must be an end? Is G*d’s eternal “kingdom” that of the immeasurable measurement of Time?

L'Olam

עד לעולם

The New Bantam-Megiddo Hebrew & English Dictionary translates **עולם** as “world, the world; universe;...”

The BDB translates this world as ancient time, long time, for ever, always, continuous existence, perpetual, everlasting, indefinite or unending future, eternity.

The *shoresh* מ.ל.ע. Also indicates a disappearance, vanishing, or concealment.

Temporal and physical, presence and absence, time and place; what are the stories that illustrate the confluence of these concepts?

The **עולם** is yours, what midrash will you d'rash, what will you explore and what will you create?

What will you discover, explore, write, and create to bring new facets of understanding to the jewels of **דברי תורה** *divrei Torah*, the words, ideas, things and matters of Torah?

Conclusion

בֶּן בָּגְגָג אָמַר, בְּפֶךְ בָּה וּבְפֶךְ בָּה, כְּלֹא בָּה.

Ben Bag Bag said: Turn it over, and [again] turn it over, for all is therein.

Perkei Avot 5:26

Ben Bag Bag refers to the study of Torah. The statement teaches that one should continuously study Torah, turning it over and over, for all wisdom is contained in it ...This mishnah is a quintessential example of how precious the study of Torah was in the eyes of the rabbis.

The intricacies of the stories and histories in the books Jews revere are best expressed in the magical, mystical, mundane, and developing Hebrew. What if we teach our students different ways of engaging with our liturgy and our texts? Is it possible that we might inspire a spiritual curiosity? Is it possible that the next generation will want to reach into the past and construct a basis for meaning, a foundation for significance? Aristotle said “Man is a goal-seeking animal. His life only has meaning if he is reaching out and striving for his goals. “

Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Gay Science* says “One who has a *why* to live for can bear almost any *how*.”

Seeking meaning is a human endeavor, seeking meaning through our histories, texts, and narratives is the work of Torah study. It is our stories and our Story that can define meaning in our lives.

What stories and Story will you explore, discover, and *d'rash* in the words, *shorashim*, and Crowns of the *d'var* of our holy texts?

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