Journal of Literature & Theology, Vol. 8 No 3, September 1994

LOVE AS A HERMENEUTIC PRINCIPLE IN RABBINIC LITERATURE

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Introduction

Midrashic literature is a collective enterprise geared at understanding the word of God, as expressed in Scripture. The various methods of rabbinic hermeneutics are ways of getting at the meaning of the biblical text, and deciphering its message for a particular interpretive collective. In listening to the Bible one usually attempts to hear the concrete message concealed within the words of the Bible. This is particularly true of the rabbinic project of halakhic Midrash. *Midrash halakha* is an attempt to find the multitudinous details of Jewish law within the text of the Torah. The teaching of law is understood by the Rabbis as a highly detailed teaching. The gap between the sparsity of the biblical text and the intricacies of the halakhic process is bridged through the Midrashic procedure. Midrash is therefore first and foremost a way of discovering a particular message within the words of the Torah. Also the non-*halakhic*, i.e. *aggadic*, Midrash listens to new ideas and new messages within the text of the Bible. The attentive listening to the Bible concerns the content and meaning of the biblical text, and therefore produces new insights, moral teachings, etc.

Midrashic interpretation is characterized by its atomistic approach to the biblical text.[1] The biblical text is broken down to its smallest individual components. The logic of the text as a whole is often discarded in favour of an accent given to a small unit of text, taken out of context.[2] Thus, the biblical text receives a new meaning, in a new context offered by the interpreting Rabbi. Through the breakdown of the biblical text a new agenda emerges, to which the biblical text can speak. So it is that the text of the Torah serves as a ground for the elaborate systems of rabbinic *Halakha* and theology.

The rabbinic reading procedures that lead to reading the biblical text form its smallest units also lead to a keen sense of the economy of the biblical text. Paying attention to the smallest components of the text leads to the understanding that every unit of text is necessary and significant in the process of interpretation. The divine word is assumed to find expression in a minimalist way. God, so to speak, takes the greatest care not to utter a word in vain.

Any expression that is deemed superfluous is therefore an anchor for a message other than the obvious message of the text. The law of conservation of divine speech guides rabbinic interpretation.

In the present article I shall explore some hermeneutic approaches and attitudes of the Rabbis that offset the above picture. The above picture, though highly characteristic of *halakhic* Midrash, and highly typical of *aggadic* Midrash as well, is not the only way of listening to the biblical text. In order to make our point I would like to present the following question: What is is that one hears when one listens to Scripture? Does one only hear the message and instruction of the Bible? That would of course be wholly suitable for a code of law or a book of instruction. But does this perspective exhaust the meaning of the Bible for its rabbinic readers? I propose to answer this question in the negative. The text of the Torah is also expressive of a relationship between Israel and God. It is understood not only as an expression of the divine will, but as an expression of divine love as well. Therefore, other forms of listening to the Bible emerge, within the corpus of rabbinic interpretation. The present study will focus primarily on the hermeneutic implications of this dimension of the biblical text. When seen as an expression of a relationship, founded on love, other hermeneutic moves are made in relation to the Bible: the rule of divine speech economy breaks down, as does the sense of message. The Bible no longer serves as a vehicle for a concrete outward message, such as law or religious instruction, but conveys another level of message, in the order of relationship and love.

Rabbinic hermeneutics is often seen from the perspective of reading practices, that are divorced from the religious significance ascribed by the Rabbis to their own activities.[3] There is however, I submit, a sense of interpretation that is defined by an awareness of the unique author of the biblical text, and the uniqueness of the relationship that is expressed in the biblical text. What we therefore ask is: what are the ways of listening to the Bible that are unique to it, given the understanding of divine authorship and relationship.

Hearing the quality of the Word

The word of God is not merely a telegraphic way of packing in voluminous information. The rabbinic reader is also aware of the unique author of the text, and therefore of a unique quality that informs the text, and its manner of expression. In listening to the text, attention may shift from the obvious, surface level teaching to an awareness of a quality or presence, particular to the divine utterance.

> "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the wicked" (Ps. 1,1). These words are to be considered in the light of what Scripture says elsewhere:

> "Hear, for ... the opening of my lips shall be right things ... all the words of my mouth are in righteousness, there is nothing froward or perverse in them" (Prov. 8,6.8) In Scripture there is never a word suggesting frowardness or perversity. Thus we find Scripture speaking in a roundabout way so as to avoid an unseemly term, as in the verse "Of clean beasts, and of beasts that are not clean" (Gen. 7,8) R. Yudan bar Manasseh added: even when Scripture is about to list the signs of uncleanness it always begins with the signs of cleanness. Thus before saying "The camel . . does not part the hoof", it says "He cheweth the cud" (Lev. 11,4). Similarly, before saying "The swine ... does not chew the cud" it says "he parteth the hoof" (Lev. 11,7). And so David said· Behold, the Holy One, Blessed be He, declared of me saying. "The Lord hath sought Him a man after His own heart ... To be captain over His people" (1Sam. 12,14) Therefore, David modeled himself upon his Creator. As his Creator refrained from using unseemly speech, so did David. Though David might have said: "Cursed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the righteous", he said instead: "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the wicked" (Midrash Psalms, 1,3, Braude, p. 5–6).

This Midrash can only be understood against the background of the rabbinic understanding of divine speech economy. In certain instances God does not chose the most economic form of expression. In the instances enumerated in this passage no particular legal lesson is drawn from the roundabout form of expression. Rather, the longer form of speech expresses a particular quality, suitable to the divine. Divine speech is characterized by purity. God refrains from uttering expressions that are impure. The quality of Divine speech overrides the principle of divine economy. The biblical text is listened to not only for its surface message—what animals may be eaten, but also for a deeper quality conveyed by the divine expression. The particular quality of the divine utterance serves as a model for emulation. Thus David follows his Creator's ways in taking the long and pure route. Scripture does offer here a teaching. However, this teaching is in the order of what we may term the quality, rather than the quantity of the divine message. The qualitative dimension accounts for quantitative expansion of the divine word, and justifies the violation of the law of speech economy.

A classic case of violation of the rule of divine speech economy is found in Genesis 24, where we hear of the procuring of a wife for Isaac. The story is told as is happened, and then repeated in the servant's speech to Laban. This occasions the following midrashic comment.

> "And he gave straw and provender for the camels" (Gen. 24,32). R. Aha said: the mere conversation of the servants of the Fathers' household is worthier than the laws [Torah] of their sons. This chapter dealing with Eliezer covers two or three columns, and [his conversation] is not only recorded but repeated. Whereas [the uncleanliness] of a reptile is an integral part of the Torah, and yet it is only

from an extending article in Scripture that we learn that its blood defiles as its flesh. R. Simeon bar Yohai deducing it from the form *hatame*, where *tame* would suffice, while R. Leazer ben R. Jose learns it from *we-zeh* instead of *zeh*.

"And water to wash his feet" (ibid). R. Aha said. the washing of the feet of the servants of the houses of the fathers is worthier than the laws of their sons, so that even the washing of their feet must be recorded. Whereas [the uncleanliness] of a reptile is an integral part of the Torah, and yet is is only from an extending article in Scripture that we learn that its blood defiled as its flesh. R. Simeon bar Yohai deducing it from the form *hatame*, where *tame* would suffice, while R. Leazar ben R. Jose learns it from *we-zeh* instead of *zeh*. (Breshit Rabbah 60,8).

The logic of this statement is only clear when we realize the painstaking attention to the detail of the biblical text that characterizes the halakhic Midrash. In order to account for legal minutiae, not explicitly mentioned in the Torah, the biblical text is combed finely for any additional particle that may convey a new shade of meaning. This painstaking reading of the legal portion stands in contrast to the waste of words encountered in the narrative sections of the Bible. Genesis 24 is replete with repetition, as well as with details that are of little ultimate significance.[4] This must be accounted for, and this is the purpose of the present midrashic statement.

As no teaching of practical consequence can be derived from the repetitions and apparent superfluidity of the biblical narrative, another order of teaching is invoked. This is an evaluative order. What is heard is not a teaching but, once more, a quality. The tension between the mode of reading that relies upon the economy of text and the narrative mode of storytelling is translated into another tension, that between the value of the fathers, the Patriarchs, and their sons, Israel. The fathers belong to a different order. Different linguistic rules apply in this order, and this is the cause of the linguistic excess associated with them. Superfluidity is accounted for in terms of value, and perhaps in terms of love. Not only the fathers, but all that is associated with them is of significance, as an extension of their very being. Therefore, even the washing of the feet of the servants of the household of the fathers[5] carries with it the associative quality of the value of the fathers themselves. This value is greater than that of the sons, Israel, and perhaps even of the Torah, which must resort to great economy in its manner of expression. Our text does not specify what exactly is the value of the fathers. It may be their great spiritual personality, or it may be the great love that God has for them. Either way, what we hear is a quality of affection and evaluation, and not a teaching in a legal or even moral sense. The excess of language is meant to convey quality, value and love.

Love as motivation for Divine action

Having seen other instances of non economic qualitative listening to Scripture, let us now proceed to the main point of our presentation: the use of love as a hermeneutic principle. A preliminary word about love in this context is in order. In the context of a relationship one may speak of different directions of love, moving between the two parties in relationship. Thus, when reviewing rabbinic literature for the concept of love between God and Israel, or individuals who love God, one might expect more or less equal attention be paid to both aspects of the love relationship. This expectation is very much frustrated by the sources. What we find in the sources is an overwhelming predominance of the motive of divine love for Israel, with very little attention paid to human reciprocity in this love relationship. Statistically, I would estimate more than 85 percent of Rabbinic utterances concerning the love relationship of God and Israel focus upon God's side. The reasons for this are not hard to guess. Human love is fickle. Divine love is faithful. The Rabbis express the human need to rely upon divine love, and in listening to Scripture attempt to find the reassurance and security that love provides. Finally, love is the basis of the status that Israel owns. As a collective expression of the voice of a community, the Rabbis give voice to the need for stability, status and security of the Jewish community, all of which are ultimately founded upon divine love. When we therefore speak of the hermeneutic function of love, we are referring to the love of God for Israel, and to the ways in which the Rabbis find this love expressed in the biblical text.

In referring to love as a hermeneutic principle, we refer to two groups of rabbinic texts, that employ the concept of love in reference to the biblical text. One the one hand we have sources that account for particular divine behaviour, explained by the concept of God's love for Israel. A second group of sources addresses linguistic phenomena, and in particular the excess of biblical language, in terms of love.[6] The first, and perhaps most basic level, in which love functions hermeneutically is a way of accounting for and explaining divine action. Actions of God, which might otherwise not make sense, are accounted for in terms of love.

> "And the Lord went before them by day" (Ex. 13,21). Is it possible to say so? Has it not already been said: "Do not I fill heaven and earth, saith the Lord?" (Jer. 23,24), and it is written: "And one called unto another and said. Holy holy holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory" (Isa. 6,3), and it also says: "And behold, the glory of the God of Israel ... and the earth did shine with His glory" (Ezek. 43,2), what then does Scripture mean by saying: "And the Lord went before them by day?"
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> Said Rabbi: Antoninus would sometimes continue his court sessions, sitting

> on the platform, till after dark, and his sons would stay with him there. When leaving the platform he himself would take a torch, and light the way for his sons. The great men of the empire would approach him saying: "We will take the torch and light the way for your sons". But he would say to them: "It is not that I have no one to take the torch and light the way for my sons It is merely to show you how beloved[7] my sons are to me, so that you should treat them with respect". In the same way, God showed the nations of the world how beloved the children of Israel were to Him, in that He Himself went before them, so that the nations should treat them with respect. (Mekhilta, tractate Beshallah, Lauterbach, vol. I, p. 185–6).

The Mekhilta is groping with the theological question of the propriety of divine behaviour. In the verse it comments upon, God is portrayed as going before Israel and thus as serving them. This seems to conflict with what would be proper to God, given his immensity and grandeur. How can God, who fills the heaven and earth, limit and abase himself to become the servant of his children? Love is the answer. The divine love for Israel accounts for the seemingly paradoxical or unfitting behaviour of God. The argument from love would seem to stand on its own. Our text does, however, resort to two supplementary arguments The one argument is taken from human precedent. Just as it is legitimate for Antoninus to serve his children, so it is legitimate for God to serve Israel. The argument from human precedent relies on the same principle of love, yet it could function as an independent argument. Likewise, the final point made in our text, addresses the educational dimensions of divine action. God acts in this particular fashion in order to teach the nations of the world how to treat Israel. Clearly, they must treat them with love, even as He loves them. The argument from love is not taken here as an exhaustive answer to the problem of propriety of divine action. Rather, there is an educational value attached to this love, that is addressed to the nations of the world. Despite the extensions in the argument, the point our text makes is clear: love motivates divine action, and allows us to accept the unexpected in divine action.[8]

Another instance in which the explanation for a particular divine action is given in terms of love is found in the following passage. This midrashic section comments upon the arrangement of the camp of Israel in the desert. Much attention is given by the biblical text to the details of the arrangement of the camp of Israel, yet no explanation is afforded as to the meaning of this arrangement. The following midrashic comment fills this gap.

> With great love did the Holy One, blessed be He, love them. For as much as He organized them under standards like the ministering angels, so that they might be easily distinguished. Whence do we know that his was a sign of love?

> Because Solomon says: "He hath brought me to the house of wine, and his standard over me is love" (Song of Songs, 2,4). (Numbers Rabbah, 2,3).

The meaning of the organization of Israel in the desert under banners is given in terms of love. The argument seems to be towfold. The arrangement under standards would seem to facilitate the love relationship, by making each tribe distinguishable. The precise recognition of each component of Israel is an expression of love. God, so it seems, can focus his love more clearly upon all components of the people, once they are distinguishable. There seems to be another argument from love in this passage. The arrangement of the camp likens Israel to the ministering angels. These too, then, are arranged according to the banners of the camp. Israel are thus arranged in the form of the angelic hosts. What this means is that God endows Israel with near angelic status. This itself is an expression of love. In his love for them he makes them resemble the angels. Possibly: the love he has for his angelic hosts is extended to their human counterpart—Israel. Thus, love ties together three parties—God, the angels, and Israel.[9] The meaning of the seemingly meaningless arrangement of the camp of Israel in the desert is thus viewed in terms expressive of divine love for humans and angels.

The divine actions discussed in the previous passages, as well as some of those we shall discuss below, are seen as expressions of love. Rabbinic exegesis thus understands divine action as communicative. In communication theory we find the distinction between analogical and digital communication.[10] Digital communication is concerned with the transmission of information. Analogical communication is that form of communication which is suitable for relationships, and would include various gestures, courtship behaviour, and diverse other non linguistic aspects of communication.[11] Further along we shall see how divine love is expressed through linguistic excess. The previous passages are examples of how the Rabbis interpret divine action, in the context of relationship. Divine action, analogically understood, is expressive of the love relationship of God to Israel.

Love and the breaking of boundaries

In the previous example divine love was the basis for the establishment of a particular order for Israel's encampment in the desert. Divine love not only establishes orders, but also breaks existing orders. We have already seen how the impropriety of divine action is accounted for by God's love. God's love further accounts for the violation of the established order of creation.

> R. Simon ben Gamliel says: Come and see how much beloved the Israelites are by Him by whose word the world came into being. Because they are so much beloved by Him, He made for them a change in the natural order of things. For their sake He made the upper region like the lower and the lower like the

> upper. In the past the bread came up form the earth and the dew would come down from heaven, as it is said: "The earth yielding corn and wine; yea, His heavens drop down dew" (Deut. 33,28). But now things have changed Bread began to come down from heaven and the dew came up from the earth, as it is said: "Behold, I will cause to rain bread from heaven", and it says: "And the layer of dew came up" (Ex 16,14) (Mekhilta, Vayassa, 3, Lauterbach, vol. II, p. 103).

In this text there is little troubling the midrashic author. We do not have a violation of expected behaviour, or paradoxical behaviour. Rather, a break is sensed within the conventional ordering of the cosmos, and this is accounted for in terms of divine love, breaking conventional boundaries. It may well be that the answer precedes the question. It may be that the author is seeking to highlight God's love for Israel, and that he finds in the disruption of common order a quaint way of doing so. The opening formula seems to indicate that underscoring the idea of love is the real issue, and not the resolution of any imagined difficulty in the biblical text.

A similar opening formula is found in the next source as well. Here too, the apparent concern is to underscore God's love for Israel. Here too boundaries are broken. These boundaries, however, concern not the natural world and its limits, but the boundaries of proper and improper conduct, of purity and impurity.

> "In the midst of which I dwell" (Num. 35,34). Beloved are Israel, for even when they are impure, the Divine presence is among them ... as it says: "That they may not defile their camp, in the midst of which I dwell" (Num. 5,3), and it says: "You shall not defile the land in which you live, in the midst of which I dwell" (Num. 35,34). R. Nathan says: beloved are Israel, for wherever they were exiled, the Divine presence is among them. They were exiled to Egypt, the Divine presence is among them ... They were exiled to Babylon, the Divine presence is among them ... They were exiled to Eilam, the Divine presence is among them .. They were exiled to Edom, the Divine presence is among them .. And when they return the Divine presence is among them. (Sifrei Numbers 161, ed. Horovitz p. 222-3).

The theology of this text subverts some important biblical concepts. In fact, this text is one of the revolutionary texts of rabbinic theology.[12] If a superficial reading of the Bible would have produced an understanding whereby Israel's sins distance it from God, the Rabbis use their exegetical skills to propound the opposite message. If biblical history touches at points upon the worries of the violation of the covenant, and the meaning of exile and suffering,[13] the Rabbis work as comforters of the people, who maintain their sense of security and trust in the loving relationship they continue to

have with God. The salient aspect of God's relationship with Israel is love. This love cuts across the very categories established by God, and mitigates, and partially obliterates, the meaning of suffering and punishment. The categories of pure and impure, are for the very prooftexts that the Midrash brings here, demarcation points, that determine God's capacity to reside among his people. God can only dwell amidst them when they maintain purity. This Biblical message is subverted.[14] God's love for Israel makes him dwell amidst his people, even when they are impure. Even more striking is the second statement. Exile could be construed as exile from God who dwells in the land,[15] and therefore as a removal from his face, and a severance of the relationship. This, however, is not the direction taken by the Midrash. The exile is largely mitigated by the fact that God himself goes into exile with his children. This radical notion, that has God participating in the suffering and in the punishment of his children, is an expression of divine love. Even if there need be judgment and punishment, divine love ultimately triumphs. This love breaks territorial boundaries, and heralds God going into exile with his children.

The linguistic expression of divine love

Love finds expression not only through God's actions for Israel, but in the particular choice of language, which God is seen as using towards Israel. Rabbinic attention to the fine points of biblical expression reveals the divine love, as expressed on the linguistic level.

> Of "For he delighteth in him" (Ps. 22:9), R. Simeon ben Lakish said: The Holy One, blessed be He, expressed his love for Israel with three words of passion: "cleaving", "longing", and "delight". "Cleaving"—"Ye that did cleave unto the Lord your God are alive" (Deut. 4,4); "Longing"—"The Lord did long for you" (Deut. 7,7); "Delight"—"The Lord delighteth in thee" (Isa. 63,4). We infer the force of these words from the story of the wicked Shechem in the chapter beginning "Dinah .. Went out" (Gen. 43,1): "Cleaving"—"His soul did cleave unto Dinah" (Gen. 34,3); "Longing"—"My son Shechem longeth for you daughter" (Gen. 34,8); "Delight"—"He had delight in Jacob's daughter" (Gen. 34,19). R. Abba bar Elisha added two more such words: "love" and "speaking to the heart"; "Love"—"I have loved you, saith the Lord" (Mal. 1,2); "Speaking to the heart"—"Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God, speak to Jerusalem's heart" (Isa. 40,2). And from the story of the wicked Shechem we learn also the force of these words, for it is said "He loved the girl, and spoke to her heart" (Gen. 34,3). (Midrash Psalms, Psalm 22,33).

Biblical language is subtle. It knows of many words to express love. The midrashic statement merely states the variety of linguistic forms employed by God to express his love for Israel. The Midrash seems to concentrate on the

relation between earthly love and divine love. Divine love is analogous to earthly love. The story of Shechem's love for Dina is a paradigm for God's love for Israel. But besides the analogy of human and divine love, what is the purpose of this observation? What is the significance of counting five different ways of expressing love? The Midrash does not seem to suggest that there are different shades of meaning to the different languages of love, though this may well be possible. Rather, the quality of love finds fuller expression through the nuancing of language, and through the excess of forms of expression. To say that God loves in three or five different ways, is to say how much God loves. Linguistic quantity is expressive of the quality of love. The Rabbis listen to the variety of expression, and recognize the subtlety of love. They hear the excess of expression, and hear love's fullness.

That love finds expression through particular linguistic forms is also the assumption of the next passage.

> "And God came to Abimelech in a dream of the night" (Gen. 20,3). What is the difference between the prophets of Israel and those of other nations? R. Hama b. R. Hanina said. The Holy One, blessed be He, reveals Himself to heathen prophets with half speech only, as you read: "And God met (ויקר) Balaam" (Num. 23,4) R. Issachar of Kefar Mandi observed: The term ויקר signifies uncleanness, as in the verse: "If there be among you any man, that is not clean by reason of that which chanceth him (מקרה) by night" (Deut. 23,11) But to the prophets of Israel He speaks with complete speech, in terms of love and sanctity, with language in which the ministering angels praise Him, as it says "And one [seraph] called (וקרא) unto another and said: Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts" (Isa. 6,3). (Breshit Rabbah, 52,5).

The difference between prophets of Israel and prophets of the nations finds linguistic expression. The shortened from of expression, used in connection with Balaam's prophecy—ויקר, rather than the fuller Hebrew verb—ויקרא, is noted by the Midrash. Where our previous example noted linguistic excess as an expression of love, the present Midrash notes linguistic lack as a sign of lack of love. Once more, the quantity of speech indicates the quality of love. The message may be identical in both cases: God speaks to a prophet. But a completely different affective quality is attached to the speech that addresses the prophets of Israel. Full speech is an expression of love. It is also an expression of holiness. Love is coupled here to another value—holiness.[16] The employment of a language of love and holiness established a correspondence, or at least a relationship, between Israel and the angels. We have seen above that the arrangement of Israel in the desert is taken to form a correspondence to the angelic encampment above. Israel is endowed with angelic status as an expression of divine love. Here too, the choice of language,

expressive of divine love, is identical to angelic language. Love find expression in the fullness of language, that unites Israel and the angels.

The linguistic expression of love is not limited to the quantitative use of language. A prime way of expressing love is through naming. For the Rabbis, naming bestows status and expresses affection. Thus, much is made in rabbinic literature of naming, as a form of expressing God's love for Israel. God's love, through which Israel and angels are related, finds expression also in the act of naming.

> Beloved are Israel. When he names them, he names them as priests, as it says: "But you shall be called priests of the Lord, and be named ministers of our God, you shall enjoy the wealth of other nations, and be furnished with their riches" (Isa. 61,6) Beloved are the priests When he names them, he names them as angels, as it says : "For the lips of the priest shall preserve knowledge, and teaching shall be sought from his mouth, for he is an angel of the Lord of hosts" (Mal. 2,7). (Sifrei Num. 119, Horowitz, p. 143).

The relationship of Israel and the angels is here established through an intermediary category: priests. A hierarchical structure is assumed, whereby each group is located above the other. God's love is expressed in the act of naming, whereby the original hierarchical structure is transformed. In love, each group is seen as occupying a higher rung on the ladder of hierarchy.[17] Thus love may be said to transform the order of existence, by elevating each group to a higher position. Israel is not directly likened onto angels in this passage, but the logic of love, and the structure of reality are identical to those seen in previous passages.

Naming as an act of loving is a wider phenomenon. The proliferation of names for Israel is taken as a sign of love. Once more, linguistic excess, and the excess of names, are taken as an indication of love.

> "So I took the head of your tribes, wise men, etc. and I charged your judges" (Deut. 1,15–16): I drew them with words, saying "How fortunate you are! Over whom are you about to be appointed! Over the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; men who have been called brothers and friends, a desired vineyard and portion, sheep of His pasture, and all [possible] terms of love". (Sifrei, Deut. 15).

In describing Israel to its future judges, Moshe slips into a praise of Israel, that finds expression in the many names given to Israel.[18] It should be noted this list of names lacks the most common appellation of endearment—Israel as sons of God, to which we shall refer further on. The reason for this is that here Israel are seen as children of the Patriarchs. Israel may be referred to as either children of God or children of the Patriarchs, yet never simultaneously,

in the same passage, are they seen as both.[19] The different names by which Israel is called are all expressions of divine love. One may understand that the divine love is of such caliber that is needs the variety of terms of endearment in order to fully, or at least approximately, find expression.

Excess in naming as an expression of love is not limited to the use of multiple names. The repetition of one name may itself be a sign of love.

> "And the angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven, and said: Abraham, Abraham" (Gen 222,11). R. Hiyya taught: This is an expression of love and encouragement. R. Liezer said: [The repetition indicates that He spake] to him and to future generations: There is no generation which does not contain men like Abraham, and there is no generation which does not contain men like Jacob, Moses and Samuel. (Breshit Rabbah 56,7).

This midrashic passage is an excellent illustration of our thesis, because it provides two alternative explanations for the double mention of Abraham's name. The second explanation accords with the general rule of divine speech economy. As only one appellation is necessary in order to address Abraham, the second appellation serves as a teaching. The teaching that is derived from the double mention of Abraham is that there is so to speak a second Abraham. This second Abraham is someone of Abraham's stature who must exist in every generation. We can best make sense of this statement when we recall the Rabbinic concept according to which the world's ongoing subsistence is a function of the existence of righteous people—צדיקים, in the world. Without a minimal number of righteous the world could not exist, and would be destroyed. Therefore, there is always a minimal number of righteous people in the world.[20] One archetype for such a righteous person is Abraham.[21] The double appellation then becomes a teaching concerning the existence of righteous people in every generation. Other biblical personages who received such a double calling from God are then seen as further examples of the guaranteed existence of the righteous in every generation. This kind of interpretation is what one would usually consider a typical rabbinic interpretation, loyal to the understanding of the economy of the Biblical text. The parallel to our text in Sifra to Leviticus, 1,1 draws a different conclusion from the same textual data: "Another interpretation of Moses, Moses: This was the very same Moses both before he had been spoken with [by God] and also afterward."[22] The essence of the hermeneutic strategy is the same. The double repetition is intended to teach us something about the subject matter. In this case it is that the recipient of the double appellation remains humble, despite being addressed by God.

Against such an interpretation, that concentrates on the message of the Biblical text, R. Hiyya offers a hearing that accents the quality of relationship

that is heard in the double appellation. The double mention of Abraham's name is an expression of love. It is not intended to convey any meaning, save the fact that God loves Abraham. Thus, excess is expressive of love. The illocutionary force of the double appellation is the force of love.

Just as in a previous passage we have love and holiness combined, this passage combines love with encouragement. Accordingly, God empowers Abraham with love and encouragement in the act of calling his name. The Hebrew here has זירוז, for what has been rendered above as encouragement.[23] However, זירוז may also mean urging on, or moving to prompt response, which would then express a quality of empowering someone to fulfill a divine commandment hastily and fully. In this case, alongside, perhaps even as a consequence of love, there is also a demand, which Abraham is called upon to fulfill, and which God empowers him to fulfill, by calling him. Our text would then present us with a movement from love, possibly without any demand attached, to a demand that may grow from this very love.[24] It may be that Abraham is in need of this empowerment and hastening, because he is told at this point in the biblical story not to sacrifice Isaac, a fact he has great trouble accepting, according to rabbinic lore.[25] However, the moment following Abraham's near offering of Isaac seems more suited to expressions of love, and perhaps the context of the biblical narrative might make the interpretation of "encouragement" more plausible.

Meeting textual difficulties with love

Until now we have seen mainly how love serves as a motivating force for divine action and speech. Implied in this usage is the overcoming of textual difficulties with the help of this principle of divine love. We have some explicit cases in which textual difficulties are resolved in this manner. One such instance, though similar to the explanation of divine action we encountered above, is in fact an attempt to deal with difficulties of the biblical text.

> "These are they that were numbered of the children of Israel by their fathers' houses" (Num. 2,32). Come and see how great is the love of the Omnipresent for Israel. For the Holy One blessed be He has four times recorded the numbers of Israel in connection with the standards. Twice in detail and twice in their sum totals. In addition he gave the numbers under each standard in their totals and in detail. All this to make known how much He loved them For they were His hosts and He was eager to number them ever so often, like a man who possesses a treasure for which he has an exceeding fondness and which he counts again and again, an infinite number of times, in order that he may make sure of the number and find pleasure therein at each numbering. (Bamidbar Rabbah 2,19).

This text is singled out from the cases discussed above as explanation of

divine action, by the fact that the divine action that calls for an explanation is related to superfluidity in the biblical text. The biblical record of the census is long, and replete with information that does not change the final count of Israel. Moreover, we have more than one count, as our text records. Our text does not frame the question in terms of superfluidity of the biblical text, but rather sees the text as expressive of the divine person and action. The textual difficulty is framed in terms of a theological difficulty. Why does God count Israel four times in great detail? Love is the answer. Divine love accounts for superfluidity in the biblical text. Excessive action is a gesture of love.

A further, perhaps clearer, case of the use of love as a means of dealing with textual difficulties is found in the following Midrash.

> "Who is this coming up from the desert" (Songs of Songs, 3,6). Did [God] bring them up from the desert, Did he not bring them up from Egypt? This teaches us how beloved Israel are. They are beloved before God as a finding one finds in the desert, to fulfill the verse that says. "He found them in a desert land" (Deut. 32,10). (Midrash Zuta, Song of Songs, 3,6)

We have seen how love leads to deviance from standard behaviour. Here love leads to deviance from normative figures of expression. The Song of Songs is read as an allusion to Israel's history. The exodus story is found reflected in the verse under discussion. The textual inaccuracy is handled by the assumption that the purpose of this text is not to convey accurate information, but to express the nature of divine feeling. God's love for Israel is as great as that of someone who finds a rare treasure in an unlikely place. For this reason Scripture deviates from the informative mode, and chooses an emotionally expressive mode instead.

Love as the message of Scripture

Perhaps the most striking application of the principle of love is to be found in a teaching of R. Akiva,[26] in Mishan Avot 3,14.

> Beloved is man for he was created in the image [of God].
> Still greater is the love in that it was made known to him that he was created in the image of God, as it is written: "For in the image of God made he man" (Gen. 9,6).
> Beloved are Israel for they were called children of God.
> Still greater is the love in that it was made known to them that they were called children of God, as it is written: "Ye are the children of the Lord your God" (Deut. 14,1).
> Beloved are Israel, for to them was given a precious instrument.
> Still greater is the love, in that it was made known to them that to them was

given the precious instrument by which the world was created, as it is written: "For I give you good doctrine; Forsake ye not my law" (Prov. 4,2).

Rabbi Akiva's statement can be divided into three parts, which form a hierarchical structure. The first part addresses God's love for mankind. The latter two address his love for Israel. The difference between the second and third statement would seem to be related to the basis for God's love. Whereas the final statement sees God's love in relation to the giving of the Torah, and thus in relation to human behaviour, the second statement emphasizes Israel's status as children, which would seem to imply an unconditional status. Thus, we have here a hierarchy of love, moving from the more general to the specific. However, Rabbi Akiva presents us with six statements, and not only with three. Each of the three statements is comprised of two statements. The first states the fact of God's love. The second refers to a still greater love. What is this greater love? As we see in all three cases, the greater love is the context in which the prooftext is brought. This prooftext is evidence for the statement that this love is made known. We are to understand therefore, that this love is made known through the medium of Scripture. Now, this understanding is at first puzzling. Le us take the first statement to illustrate the problem: the prooftext from Genesis would seem to support the first half of the statement, that is: man is created in the image of God. Ostensibly, without the scriptural information we have no way of accessing this knowledge. Yet Rabbi Akiva seems to reserve the scriptural evidence for the second part of each statement. The greater love is evidenced by the fact that Scripture records God's love. In the structure that is here presented the role of Scripture is not that of providing information. The information might be known otherwise. Even if theoretically Scripture itself is the source of our knowledge, this is not what is important in Scripture. The importance of Scripture's record is that Scripture is a way of expressing love. The fact that God chose to inform us of what we learn in Scripture is not significant for content or information, but as an expression of divine love.

Rabbi Akiva's saying contains three examples of scriptural verses, in accordance with the hierarchical structure of this particular statement. However, from Scripture's perspective, one cannot isolate these three verses from the rest of Scripture. What this saying leads to is a different approach to the meaning of the biblical text. The biblical text is not important as a source of information. Even if indeed our information is derived from the Bible, we might have had access to it otherwise, and in any event, this is not the source of the Bible's significance. Rather, the biblical text is a message of love. In a sense, the whole of the biblical text is hereby made superfluous. If the Bible were merely a record of law and lore, it would be deemed religiously insufficient,[27] and therefore superfluous. Rabbi Akiva deals with this problem

as other passages deal with issues of excess and superfluidity. The meaning of the text is in love.[28]

It might be of interest to reflect upon the relationship of Rabbi Akiva's hermeneutics of love, and St. Augustine's principle of charity in interpreting the Bible. According to Augustine,[29] the ultimate purpose of biblical edification is to lead man to the greater love of God and the other. Therefore, this overarching concern of the Biblical message serves as the hermeneutic key to understanding the Bible. When a literal understanding of Scripture should be propounded, and when a figurative understanding of Scripture should be adopted, depends upon the application of this heremeneutic rule. The better interpretation is that which will lead to the greater love of God and the other. When we contrast these two hermeneutics of love, the differences between them become obvious. St. Augustine's hermeneutic is a key to the human interpretation of the Bible. God is the teacher, and his teaching is geared at enhancing love. This is the love man feels for both God and man. By contrast, Rabbi Akiva's hermeneutic of love seems to have little to do with teaching. It does not serve as a guideline for human interpretation of Scripture. The love it refers to is not man's love for God, but God's love for man. And this love seems to be not the message of the biblical text, but rather its meaning. The concrete message to be learnt from the Bible is derived in accordance with accepted rabbinic norms of interpretation. Unlike Augustine, the Rabbis have no problem with the concreteness or materiality of the biblical text. Therefore, in the process of interpretation, love is not given a preferential place. There is no effort to accent love as a central teaching or as a central demand of the Bible. However, when listening to the quality of the word, to the relationship it expresses and to the ultimate purpose of recording Scripture, what one hears is the voice of God, expressing a message of love, to his people Israel and to humanity.

Encounter with the divine word: love and power

Hearing the word of God as expressive of a quality of relationship need not be a function of textual difficulty, or a way of dealing with excess in the biblical text. Love may be seen to be the simple meaning of the act of God's communication. In this context it is relevant to look at two passages that comment upon God's self disclosure at Sinai. What is heard at Sinai is God's love. The way God's revelation is perceived here is exemplary of the meaning of revelation in general. What characterizes the two passages we are about to discuss is the emphasis on the relational and emotive aspects of the encounter with the word of God. This is not presented as an answer to any textual difficulty, but as the obvious expression of God's revelation, and man's reaction to it.

We have seen in some passages how love is coupled with other expressions.

In the following passages love is coupled with awe, or fear. This combination is typical of rabbinic thought, that often juxtaposes love and awe as two basic and complementary religious modes.[30] In the following passages, love and awe are antithetical, and serve as alternate ways of reacting to the Divine, and as different qualities heard in the word of God.

> R. Judah and R. Nehemiah differed. According to R. Judah, in this particular context [Ex. 20,2] the term "nky' [אנכי = I] is a way of expressing love, a way of expressing affection. Consider the analogy of a king who sent his son away to a far country by the sea where he learned the language of the people by the sea, and when he returned from the far country by the sea, the king began to talk to his son in the language the son had learned. Even so, when Israel were in the land of Egypt, they learned the Egyptian speech; and when they came before mount Sinai, the Holy One blessed be He, began His speaking to them with the word "nky', which is "nwk' in Egyptian.
>
> R. Nehemiah said: "In this particular context, "nky' is a term intended to inspire fear, a term intended to inspire awe". (Pesikta Rabbati, Piska 21, Braude, p. 435).

There is no particular difficulty in the opening word of the decalogue. It would seem that the rabbinic reflection found here is a way of listening to the Bible, rather than of dealing with any difficulties inherent in its words. Moreover, the fact that these are the opening words of God's revelation, affords an occasion for reflection on the very meaning of God's revelation. Furthermore, God's opening word is a statement of himself, a kind of self disclosure. This affords an excellent occasion for reflection on the meaning of revelation and of the divine encounter with man, in the form of a controversy, concerning the opening word of the decalogue—'I'. What is it that is heard in the divine 'I'? R. Yehuda's answer is that love is the essence of the divine self disclosure. When listening to revelation that is what is expressed therein. Love finds a specific expression in the parable, through use of a theory of divine accommodation. In order to arrive at this interpretation, an Egyptian etymology is invoked.[31] Both the meaning of the word, according to this etymology, and the very nature of divine speech are expressions of love. The divine accommodation to the limitations of Israel, resulting in divine Egyptian, may itself be seen as an expression of love. God lowers himself to a human way of speech, so that he may be understood in love.

R. Nehemia does not offer a parallel etymology for the word under discussion.[32] This is particularly important for our discussion. R. Nehemiah may be reacting to R. Yehuda's position, by offering the alternative, and complementary position: not love of God, but fear of God. Yet hermeneutically, what R. Nehemiah does has no foundation. The only foundation

is in the very act of listening to the words of Scripture, and in reflecting upon the meaning of the divine 'I', being disclosed. Here R. Nehemiah is aware of the awe, that is attendant upon the encounter with the divine. Here clearly interpretation follows different rules. It is not through any etymology or precedent that the divine 'I' is understood as awe inspiring. Rather, it is through the process of hearing the quality of the divine word, which manifests not as a message, but as a relational quality, in this case: an awe inspiring quality.

How the word of God is heard, or rather, tasted, may best be seen by the following description of what took place at Mt. Sinai.

> "His mouth is Sweet" (Song of Songs 5,16). [God was] like a king who spoke harshly to his son, so that the latter was frightened and fainted. When the king saw that he had fallen into a faint, he began to embrace and kiss him, and spoke gently to him, saying: "What ails thee? Art thou not my only son? Am I not thy father?" So, when God said "I am the Lord thy God" (Ex. 20,2) straightaway their souls left them. When they were dead the angels began to embrace and kiss them and say: "What ails you? Do not fear; "Ye are children of the Lord you God" (Deut. 14,1). And the Holy One, blessed be He, made the word sweet in their mouths, and said to them: "Are you not my sons? "I am the Lord your God". Ye are my people, ye are beloved unto me'. And so He began to coax them until their souls returned and they began to entreat Him. Hence, "His mouth is sweet". (Song of Songs Rabbah 5,16,3).

In the previous passage two sages disputed the nature of the divine speech at Sinai—was it an awe inspiring or a loving speech. The present text plays both qualities of speech against each other, in a single moment of speech. The initial effects of the divine speech are awe producing, to the point of death. The midrashic tradition according to which Israel experienced death at Mt. Sinai[33] is seen as a valid reaction to the manifestation of God. Moreover, it is not a mistaken understanding of the divine speech that produces this deathly fearful reaction. The parable presents a king who speaks harshly against his son. The stern action belongs to the father, and is not a mistaken reaction of the son. This fearful quality is contained in the initial divine utterance: 'I am the Lord your God.' The realization of God's Divinity thus produces terror and death. However, following this initial reaction there is a moment of resuscitation, in which the harshness of the initial utterance is sweetened. In the parable it is the king himself who sweetens his words. In the reality the parable addresses there are two stages to the comforting motion. The first stage is conducted by the angels. The angels inform Israel that they are children of the Lord. This is, as we have seen above, a designation of love. God then repeats the message of the angels, calling Israel 'sons'. Exodus 20,2 is now heard as an acknowledgement of sonship, and of God's

love for Israel. Thus the word of God is sweetened. The very same word that initially instilled terror and death, now is a source of love and comfort. Sweetening the word does not necessitate the making of any new or different statement on behalf of God. It only calls for another kind of listening, and of hearing a different relational quality in the same words. What was initially fear has given way to love. What was initially death turns to be a source of life. The fearful reaction is a legitimate consequence of the encounter with the Divine. However, it is the initial reaction, than then gives way to a different hearing and understanding of the word of God. The ultimate quality of the word of God is love.

Summary

In what has preceded we tried to demonstrate an aspect of rabbinic hermeneutics that turns to the biblical word as an expression of particular spiritual, emotional and relational qualities. The word of Scripture is not looked to only for information, commandment, or content, but as an expression of particular qualities that are unique to it. The uniqueness of the biblical word is a function of its author, and of the context of the relationship it gives expression to. Thus the word of God expresses qualities of purity, holiness, awe, affection, and love. Most prominent in the sources we analyzed was the quality of love as indicative of the essence of divine speech. This love, which extends mostly for the collectivity of Israel, though in one instance of all humanity was seen as partaking of this love, is a function of the relationship of Israel and God. Thus the Torah, as a document framed within a relationship, is taken to express love in the very act of divine revelation and self disclosure.

The concern for the relational quality of the word of God finds expression in Rabbinic hermeneutics. The principle of divine speech economy, according to which God always expresses himself in a minimalist manner, is broken as an expression of love. Thus, excess expresses love. Love becomes a hermeneutic category for accounting for excess and superfluidity in divine speech and action. Love is the motivating force of God's actions towards Israel, and therefore accounts for disruptions in accepted orders: both natural and linguistic. In sum: we would not be stretching our evidence if we conclude that according to certain rabbinic formulations, God's love for Israel is the sense and essence of the Torah.

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REFERENCES

[1] See Itzhak Heineman, *Darchei Ha'agada* (Jerusalem, 1970), p. 96 ff., 108ff; 137 ff.

[2] See David Instone Brewer, *Techniques and Assumptions in Jewish Exegesis before 70 CE*

(J C.B Mohr (Paul Siebeck): Tübingen, 1992), p. 172.

[3] This is true for much of recent literary interest in Midrash This is also true for the quest for ancient parallels to rabbinic hermeneutic methods. See Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York, 1950), p. 53–82, Stephen J Lieberman, "A mesopotamian background for the so-called *aggadic* 'measures' of Biblical hermeneutics?", HUCA, 58 (1987), p 157–225

[4] Significance in this case is measured from the legal perspective, as conveying information significant for religious praxis The Mekhilta's question why the ten commandments do not serve as the opening of the Torah (Mekhilta, Tractate Bahhodesh, ch V, Lauterbach, vol II, p. 229) expresses the understanding that what is really important in the Torah is its legal content Such an understanding challenges the meaning of the narrative portion of the Torah. From this perspective not only linguistic or narrative excess constitute a problem, but the narrative frame is itself in need of justification.

[5] Note the chain of genetives used here. This is a conscious device, employed by the Midrash to convey the sense that even a proximate relationship to the fathers is coloured by their particular quality and value, and thus is of greater significance than anything that may pertain to the sphere of their children, even their Torah. Another example of this motif is found in Breshit Rabbah 82,14.

[6] I shall not enter into a wider discussion of the nature of God's love for Israel in rabbinic sources. Examples of some aspects of love that do not fall within the scope of the present presentation would be suffering as an expression of love (for example Sifrei Deuteronomy 32 and 311), evaluation of the quality of divine love (ibid 309), or the expression of love through the giving of the commandments (ibid 36)

[7] I have deviated from Lauterbach's translation concerning the term crucial to our discussion -חיבה. Some English translators have rendered this term in some contexts as 'love', while others have rendered it in other contexts as 'dear'. Thus, Lauterbach translates here 'how dear my sons are to me'. In order to avoid confusion, and to highlight the thesis of my presentation, throughout this paper I have chosen 'love' to translate חיבה.

[8] For a further instance of the same theological problematic in the Mekhilta, yielding the same answer, see Tractate Shirata, Lauterbach, vol II, p. 34. For divine self limitation as expressive of love see also Simeon ben Azzai's statement in Sifra, Nedavah, 2, trans. Neusner, p. 74

[9] This may be in contradistinction to the common motive of jealousy or competition between Israel, or particular individuals therein, and angels. See, Peter Schaefer, *Rivalitaet Zwischen Engeln und Menschen* (Walter de Gruyter Berlin, 1975). Here there seems to be a peaceful coexistence, or at least an extension of the divine love, from the angelic to the human realm. Because this text focuses on the divine actions of love, and not directly on the human-angelic relationship, it can smooth over any tension between the human and the angelic, and portray all in a continuum of love.

[10] Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin, Don Jackson, *Pragmatics of Human Communication* (W. W. Norton and Co: New York, 1967).

[11] ibid p. 53 ff

[12] See Shimon Ravidovitch, *Iyunim Bemachshevet Israel* (Jerusalem, 1969), vol I, p 114; A J Heschel, *Theology of Ancient Judaism*, (in Hebrew) (Soncino: London and New York, 1962), vol I, p. 65–92.

[13] See for example Leviticus 26, Jeremiah 34, 17 ff.

[14] In the case of Num 35,34 the Midrash may be playing out a complexity inherent within the Biblical text itself. Does God dwell amidst the land or amidst the people?

[15] Despite rabbinic statements regarding divine omnipresence, there is a powerful streak of thought that struggles with the meaning of God's dwelling in the land of Israel, and that sees God as essentially present only, or at least, primarily, in the land of Israel. See, for example, the opening of the Mekhilta, Lauterbach, vol 1, p.7–8.

[16] For the same coupling see also, Mekhilta, Shirata, chapter 4, Lauterbach, vol 2, p.34.

[17] The notion of a ladder is pertinent to this passage, as it immediately follows a commentary on Jacob's dream, in which a ladder is seen, on which angels ascend and descend.

[18] One rabbinic tradition enumerates as many as 70 names for Israel. See Shir Hashirim Zuta, 1,1.

[19] See my *God and Israel as Father and Son in Tannaitic Literature* (Hebrew University Ph D., 1986), p. 282, n 41.

[20] See E. E. Urbach, *The Sages* (Magnes Press: Jerusalem, 1979), p 488–492

[21] See Breshit Rabbah 49,3

[22] *Sifra, an analytical translation* by J. Neusner (Scholars Press: Atlanta, 1988), vol. I, p. 69.

[23] This rendering following the Soncino Midrash translation, as well as Jastrow's translation, s v זירז

[24] Compare the sequence of motives in Mishna Avot 3,14, discussed below, where Israel's unconditional status as beloved children of God is followed by a statement of their being beloved on account of the Torah, which they have received

[25] See Shalom Spiegel, the legend of Isaac's slaying and resurrection, in *Alexander Marx Jubilee Volume*, Hebrew section, (New York, 1950), pp. 471 ff

[26] Love, in all its aspects, seems to be an important concept in the teaching of R. Akiva in general. See S. Safrai, *Rabbi Akiva ben Yosef* (in Hebrew) (Mossad Bialik· Jerusalem, 1970), p 34 ff

[27] A position clearly articulated by later Jewish mystics. See Gerschom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Schoken New York, 1941), p. 210.

[28] Interestingly, love is not usually singled out as a hallmark of the meaning of Torah, or the meaning of its study A clear liturgical expression of the principle of love is found in the benediction *Ahava Rabbah*, recited prior to the reading of the *Shma* as part of the morning service

[29] *On Christian Doctrine*, 3 10.

[30] See Urbach, ibid p. 406 ff. On the complementarity of love and fear in Rabbinic religious experience, see, for example, Sifrei to Deut. 6,5, section 32

[31] Rabbinic reliance on other languages for interpreting the Bible is common See Yonah Fraenkel, *Darchei Ha'agada VehaMidrash* (*Yad Latalmud*, 1991), vol I, p. 115 ff.

[32] The parable that follows in Pesikta Rabbati offers partial compensation by establishing an association of this keyword with other contexts in which it was used, and which ostensibly are related to the presence of the king, and thus to fear of him. Yet, this association in no way stems from the word under discussion, and is clearly superimposed upon it.

[33] See Ira Chernus, 'Revelation and initiatory death in third century midrash', chapter 3, pp 17–32, in *Mysticism in Rabbinic Judaism*, (Walter de Gruyter· Berlin, New York, 1982).