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## WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM LOUIS JACOBS?

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Review of Harry Freedman, *Reason to Believe: The Controversial Life of Rabbi Louis Jacobs* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2020)

In the preface to his autobiography, Louis Jacobs (1920-2006) voiced strong doubts that the details of his "rather uneventful life would have been worth recording had it not been for the so-called Jacobs Affair"<sup>1</sup> for which he would spend the majority of his life as a divisive figure in the United Kingdom and beyond due to his expressed views on the subject of Divine Revelation. With *Reason to Believe: The Controversial Life of Rabbi Louis Jacobs*, Harry Freedman seeks to prove Jacobs wrong by presenting the man beneath the scholarship and controversies, chronicling Jacobs's life and illuminating his personality. In reviewing Freedman's biography and discussing the implications of Jacobs's unique theology, I hope to demonstrate that there is much to be gained in revisiting Jacobs's life and works in light of current discourse within Orthodox communities.

Freedman's exploration of his biographical subject is remarkably thorough, taking readers on the journey of

Jacobs's life through old files, diaries, scrapbooks, newspaper clippings, sermons, lectures, and more. To read

this book is to walk alongside Jacobs at each formative stage of his journey: a nominally Orthodox but not-particularly-observant childhood; teenage years spent learning in the Manchester yeshiva and Gateshead kollel; beginning his rabbinic career as assistant at the Golders Green Beth Ha-Medrash ("Munk's Shul") while taking university classes in Semitics; serving as rabbi of Manchester's Central Synagogue; being appointed minister of the prestigious New West End Synagogue while running into his first bouts of trouble with the United Synagogue; serving as Moral Tutor at the Jews' College rabbinical seminary, where the 'Jacobs Affair' took shape.

The Jacobs Affair itself began in 1961 when Jacobs stepped down as Moral Tutor from Jews' College. Though he had initially taken the position on the assumption that he would be made principal of the seminary within a few years, it became clear that Chief Rabbi Israel Brodie and the London Beth Din that advised him had no intention of making the appointment due to theological views published in Jacobs's 1957 book, *We Have Reason to Believe*, which did not accord with traditional understandings of *Torah min hashamayim* - Torah from heaven.

Then, after Jacobs spent some time heading and teaching on behalf of the Society for the Study of Jewish Theology, his former pulpit at the New West End became vacant, and

the board unanimously approved him to return as minister of the congregation. But formal approval was needed from the Chief Rabbi, who refused to grant it—again citing Jacobs’s published theological views. When the New West End board opted to appoint Jacobs to the position anyway, they were removed from office and replaced by the United Synagogue. Eventually they, along with Jacobs, founded the independent New London Synagogue which would eventually join the Masorti (Conservative) Movement, where Jacobs would find himself at the intellectual helm.

When recording each step of Jacobs’s life, Freedman makes sure to emphasize that “Jacobs’s choice of path was that of the middle way. Between tradition and modernity, Englishness and Jewishness, reason and belief. It was a path from which he would never deviate.”<sup>2</sup> This exceptionally positive tone toward Jacobs, taking for granted that his way was ideal, betrays Freedman’s own bias as a former chief executive of Masorti UK. As a biographer, he is in fact quite sympathetic to Jacobs’s struggles. As he writes in his introduction:

For the best part of half a century, [Jacobs] had been an outcast from the Orthodox community that had once hailed him as a genius, their brightest and most promising hope for the future. Spurned by those who could not reconcile his theology with the established creed, nor accept his refusal to compromise when it came to matters of the mind. Disparaged by former colleagues and students, who considered the conclusions he reached through intellectual prowess and depth of learning to threaten their traditions and the religious commitment of their congregations. They feared his reputation as a man of reason, a spiritual leader with his feet on the ground, a theologian who spoke the language of ordinary people, a polymath with a depth of knowledge unequaled in the British rabbinate.<sup>3</sup>

Still, for the most part, Freedman does not let his clear sympathies toward Jacobs get in the way of a fair presentation of information. For example, rather than maintaining the popular narrative of Jacobs as a wholly innocent victim who didn’t want to make a fuss,<sup>4</sup> he notes that Jacobs’s fighting spirit when it came to intellectual principles “explains why he had refused to back down in his early battles with Chief Rabbi Brodie and Dayan Swift [of the London Beth Din] . . . As he got older he became less and

less inhibited about making his feelings known.”<sup>5</sup> As R. Dr. Benjamin Elton of Sydney’s Great Synagogue recently suggested when writing about why Jacobs opted to stay in England at the height of his controversies instead of relocating to a friendlier environment, “Jacobs, on some level, actually enjoyed the fight. Not all of it, and not all the time, but being a martyr has its benefits, and being an unusual, prominent[,] even notorious figure has its attractions.”

This readiness and willingness to fight had a habit of showing itself in Jacobs’s repeated clashes with the British Chief Rabbinate. As Freedman explains,

Jacobs was always convinced that any serious Jewish scholar who had been educated in Western universities could not deny the reasonableness of biblical criticism, and therefore a critical-historical view of revelation. He thought this of the Chief Rabbis whom he had known, and he forcefully rejected the idea that they had the authority to rule on what could not be believed, while not being specific themselves about what they did believe.<sup>6</sup>

Jacobs’s animosity was particularly apparent in his interactions with Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, whom he rightly or wrongly saw “as something of a protégé, as one of few people who concurred with his position despite never giving any public hint of doing so... it was as if he wondered why Jonathan Sacks had not been prepared to do what he had done, and put his career on the line for the sake of intellectual principle.”<sup>7</sup> When Sacks called Jacobs one *erev Yom Kippur* to apologize for the tone he expressed in a public critique of the elder thinker, Jacobs publicized the conversation in his sermon the very next day, saying that “while it was nice of the Chief Rabbi to make the call it did not mean very much in practical terms.”<sup>8</sup> For whatever reason, Jacobs seemed to have a preference for applying oil to the fires of his fights with the Chief Rabbinate (regardless of who held the title) rather than water.<sup>9</sup>

Freedman also avoids the popular—but inaccurate—narrative taking for granted that Jacobs would have been offered principalship of Jews’ College after leaving his congregation to take up the position of Moral Tutor if not for the machinations of the London Beth Din and Chief Rabbi Brodie. As Freedman admits, the prospects “did not look very likely”<sup>10</sup> initially, and much of Jacobs’s fellow faculty were “wary” of him from the start, even writing to the Chief Rabbi to express joint concern about his potential

appointment as principal of the college due to his problematic views.<sup>11</sup>

Still, at times, and perhaps because of his incomplete objectivity, Freedman tells narratives which have been discounted by others based on a good deal of evidence. Freedman writes, for example, that Jacobs “never had an ambition to be Chief Rabbi. He would have taken the job if they’d appointed him, but it would have been through duty, not desire.”<sup>12</sup> But R. Dr. Elliot Cosgrove points out in his doctoral dissertation on Jacobs, with much support, that Jacobs’s aspirations “in all likelihood extended to the position of Chief Rabbi. Indeed ... Jacobs intimates as much in stating his reasons for accepting the Jews’ College post.”<sup>13</sup>

Most egregiously, Freedman uncritically accepts the popular telling of events when discussing the initial reception of *We Have Reason to Believe*, writing that Jacobs “was already highly regarded within the London Jewish community, and it is unlikely that no United Synagogue rabbis read the book when it came out. It is far more likely that nobody at the time felt that his views were particularly unusual or unpalatable.”<sup>14</sup> Near the end of the biography, Freedman doubles down on this claim, writing that Jacobs “didn’t believe that the dominant rabbinic voices raised against him typified the Anglo-Jewish community.”<sup>15</sup> Put differently, Freedman writes that Jacobs “saw no reason why he should relinquish his identity as an Orthodox rabbi because of what he saw as the inauthentic theology of his opponents.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Jacobs himself held onto his claim of Orthodoxy in his autobiography, writing that “after thirty years I still fail to see how the book could have been considered heretical in the tepid Orthodoxy typical of Anglo-Jewry.”<sup>17</sup> After all, “if Orthodoxy meant, as it had in Anglo-Jewry, an adherence to traditional practice [rather than to ideological ‘fundamentalism’], then I could ... be Orthodox.”<sup>18</sup>

However, as R. Dr. Benjamin Elton notes, British Orthodoxy was never as accepting of opinions like those espoused by Jacobs as his words would lead one to believe. Regardless of who was serving as Chief Rabbi, “the authorship of the Pentateuch was and had always been a red line in Anglo-Jewry. Those who were traditional on that question were acceptable, and those who were not traditional on that question, were not.”<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Cosgrove compellingly demonstrates that Jacobs’s own correspondences indicate that “to his ideological right and left, he knew full well the magnitude of his contentions. Jacobs’s later insistence that his theology was consistent with Anglo-Jewish Orthodoxy belief must be understood as a rhetorical strategy and not consistent with the facts.”<sup>20</sup> R. Dr. Alan Brill has also posited that “Jacob’s [sic] ideas were not unfairly rejected as un-

Orthodox. And if his ideas were accepted it would not have created a more modern Orthodoxy, rather a British United Synagogue closer to the liberal side of the American Conservative movement.” Indeed, a decade after writing his autobiography, even Jacobs came to admit that “I was wrong in imagining that [my] views are compatible with Orthodoxy as this is now understood in fundamentalist terms”<sup>21</sup> and “though labels are often restrictive, and misleading, honesty now compels me, in order to avoid confusion, to describe my position not as Orthodox but as Masorti.”<sup>22</sup>

Freedman’s conclusions on Jacobs’s Orthodoxy may stem from his failure to fully engage with the substance of Jacobs’s theology. While the decision to tell his readers the story of Jacobs’s life rather than teach them his ideas is certainly understandable for a popular biography, it is unfortunate because any mentions of Jacobs’s theology end up scattered throughout the biography, and their full implications ultimately end up uncommunicated.

To Freedman, the crux of Jacobs’s theological argument is that one must be open to biblical criticism, but not necessarily accepting of all its conclusions, and in this way one “should strive for a synthesis between the new and old ways of understanding revelation.”<sup>23</sup> Freedman notes, for example, that Jacobs would forever insist that his debate on the subject with ‘fundamentalists’ was not about the concept of ‘Torah From Heaven’ itself, but that “the only question regarding the revelation of the Torah was how it reached human hands.”<sup>24</sup>

And yet Freedman does not really articulate how exactly Jacobs thought that the Torah reached human hands in a way that did not necessitate a full acceptance of biblical criticism. Similarly, Freedman does not adequately explain himself when he writes that Jacobs’s position “accepts the binding nature of the commandments, without conceding that the command had to come directly from God in order to be binding. The fact that there is a human element in the Torah does not deprive it of sanctity or authority.”<sup>25</sup>

Thus, Freedman’s readers are left wondering: how much of a human hand, according to Jacobs, is in the composition of the Torah? And how can Torah come ‘from’ Heaven if Heaven has chosen not to directly communicate with humanity? In what sense can a halakhah derived by this sort of theology truly be seen as binding in all of its details? If it cannot, in fact, be said to be binding, then how can it not threaten the established norms of British Orthodoxy? Freedman does not answer any of these questions despite hinting at relatively conservative answers. And perhaps this is the crux of the problem with Freedman’s treatment:

when one undertakes a more comprehensive assessment of Jacobs's theology, it becomes more difficult to deem his approach compatible with Orthodox norms.

A more accurate understanding can be reached by briefly exploring Jacobs's own writing on these topics in several of his published works: particularly *We Have Reason to Believe* (1957), *Principles of the Jewish Faith* (1964), and *Beyond Reasonable Doubt* (1999).

While Jacobs acknowledged that "Judaism stands or falls on the belief in revelation,"<sup>26</sup> he viewed the traditional doctrine of *Torah min ha-shamayim*—Torah being dictated in direct language from God to Moses whether on Mount Sinai or throughout Israel's stay in the wilderness—as unsustainable in the face of the 'contemporary' scholarship to which he was exposed while pursuing his university studies.<sup>27</sup> In *Principles of the Jewish Faith*, Jacobs states that it should be "obvious that the eighth principle of Maimonides [affirming direct revelation] cannot be accepted as it stands by the Jew with even a rudimentary sense of history"<sup>28</sup> and that the doctrine of verbal revelation "is not intellectually respectable today and has been abandoned by all who are aware of the facts."<sup>29</sup>

At the same time, Jacobs acknowledged that the believing Jew is walking on "dangerous [theological] ground when considering what is now known as the Higher Criticism, in which the traditional views concerning the authorship of the Biblical books is seriously contested."<sup>30</sup> And while Jacobs believed that a synthesis must be found—for the sake of no less than Judaism's respectability—the synthesis he had in mind proved to be far more complicated than suggested by only reading Freedman's biography. According to Jacobs in *We Have Reason to Believe*, we can only hear the authentic voice of God as mediated by the all too human words of Torah. We only recognize it as the voice of God "because of the uniqueness of its message and the response it awakens in our higher nature—and its truth is in no way affected in that we can only hear that voice through the medium of human beings who, hearing it for the first time, endeavoured to record it for us."<sup>31</sup>

But how can the Torah represent an authentic voice of God if it only presents God's voice through fallible human articulations?

Jacobs would not explore the full implications of this approach in detail until the writing of *We Have Reason To Believe's* sequel, *Beyond Reasonable Doubt*. After a discussion where "he sees no reason to deny the supernatural elements of his religion"<sup>32</sup> and the possibility of divine-human cooperation, Jacobs ultimately clarifies

that "the *mitzvot* are not direct commands given by God but the result of human reflection and adaptation over the ages"<sup>33</sup> and that the whole Torah can be seen as a "human reflection on the past."<sup>34</sup>

In sum, Jacobs views the Torah as being composed entirely by human beings reflecting on an internal relationship with God in their own words and with all the flaws of normal human beings. It is then through a process of historical selection that Judaism becomes defined along with its unique practices and beliefs. Jacobs's God does not speak in words, but via history. God, who shows His hand through the movement of time, has decided that this Torah would ultimately be what we have and what is accepted by His people—that very fact is what renders it holy.<sup>35</sup> As he writes, "When all is said and done, history has decided, or, better, God has decided through history ... that this, therefore, is the admittedly man-made Torah that God wishes us to keep if we wish to be faithful to Judaism as a religion."<sup>36</sup>

But while this view may provide a reason to see oneself within a halakhic system generally, why should one follow halakhah's minutiae if they admit that the particular phrasings in the Torah from which halakhah is derived did not come from God?

In *Principles of the Jewish Faith*, Jacobs implies that his theology would lead an adherent to view even rabbinic laws as part of an intricate divine plan worthy of fulfillment in the world<sup>37</sup> since there is no true divide between the Torah's human and divine elements anyway.<sup>38</sup> However, it is one thing to buy into a general concept of divinity expressed in human language and enactments that teaches us to rest on the seventh day; it is quite another for such a belief to bind one to observe 39 *melakhot* as well as their *toldot*. Why, then, should one care about halakhic minutiae? As it turns out, one doesn't necessarily have to. He admits that "psychologically, it is undeniable that a clear recognition of the human development of Jewish practice and observance is bound to produce a somewhat weaker sense of allegiance to the minutiae of Jewish law."<sup>39</sup> He even goes so far as to say that the non-fundamentalist "might feel free to depart from the halakhah in his personal life"<sup>40</sup> due to their understanding of Torah. This is admitted in even stronger language in *Beyond Reasonable Doubt's* conclusion: "Once one acknowledges that all Jewish institutions have had a history, which we can now trace to a large extent, one is entitled—I would say duty-bound—to be selective in determining which practices are binding, because of their value for Jewish religious life today, and which have little or no value."<sup>41</sup>

It would seem, then, that the initial review of *We Have Reason to Believe* penned by Isadore Epstein (Principal of Jews' College immediately preceding the Jacobs Affair) was right on the money: "The fatal and inherent weakness of those who deny the Divine origins of the Bible, even if their personal religious behavior conforms to the highest standard, lies in the lack of any valid objective authority for what they teach or affirm."<sup>42</sup> This critique is especially sharp when one realizes that despite Jacobs's attacks on Mordecai Kaplan's theology in the opening chapters of *We Have Reason to Believe*, the two share much in common when it comes to an internal framework for the determination of personal religious practice and moral development.<sup>43</sup>

Because of these views, particularly his personal halakhic approach, Jacobs's theology was a unique accident of his time and biography, not one that is easily replicable in others. Cosgrove notes that "despite Jacobs's intellectual cognition that Judaism has always been shaped by the conditions in which it existed, his reflexive traditionalism would never permit him to actively reconstruct Jewish practice according to the changing needs of his own lifetime."<sup>44</sup> And yet, while Jacobs's New London Synagogue kept all of the traditional practices of its Orthodox predecessor, the *New North London Synagogue* co-founded by Jacobs's son "felt itself free to be innovative"<sup>45</sup> by eliminating the *mehitzah* separating men and women and by allowing women to deliver sermons immediately upon its founding.

Surely then, Jacobs's theology was far outside of traditional Orthodox assumptions about the Torah's divinity and authority. And despite Freedman's attempts to show otherwise, the implications of Jacobs's theology did indeed threaten the traditions and the religious commitments of the United Synagogue.

Still, Freedman's biography remains valuable, particularly because the story it tells about exclusion from communal life and the boundaries of legitimate faith discourse resonates today. Ultimately, the United Synagogue decided that Jacobs's views were problematic enough that he should be barred from returning to his old pulpit even after the

congregation's unanimous vote to rehire him, and even the *hareidi* London Beth Din made it clear that allowing him to return to his old pulpit would have been a good solution to the controversy—relegating Jacobs to life as a fringe rabbi in a fringe community.<sup>46</sup> Instead, Chief Rabbi Brodie put his foot down, resulting in the Masorti Movement finding its footing in the UK. According to Freedman, this decision directly "alienated a large part of their [United Synagogue] community, enhanced [Jacobs's] scholarly reputation[,] and guaranteed his popularity."<sup>47</sup> Yet to Brodie, Jacobs's theology was so problematic and dangerous to Orthodox behavioral cohesion that he had to be cast out of official Anglo-Orthodoxy, even if such a decision allowed the seeds of his thought to be planted in fertile soil and eventually grow into a forest that continues to challenge the older infrastructure of British Jewry.<sup>48</sup>

Can the lessons of Jacobs's treatment be applied to the issues American Orthodoxy is currently confronting? Where are the red lines? What is worth schism, and what can be integrated into a big tent with relatively little fuss? Should a distinction be made between innovations in practice alone as opposed to ideological innovations that redefine how we understand the Torah's very divinity? By what metric can either sort of innovation be judged, and how can issues be dealt with most tactfully? Finally, how far is American Modern Orthodoxy willing to go to defend its beliefs and practices against criticism from both our right and left?<sup>49</sup> Exploring the life, thought, and legacy of Louis Jacobs with the aid of Freedman's thorough biography may be an excellent first step toward answering those questions for ourselves as a community journeying toward (paraphrasing the late Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm) halakhic legitimacy, philosophical persuasiveness, religious inspiration, and personal conviction as well as commitment.

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<sup>1</sup> Louis Jacobs, *Helping with Inquiries: An Autobiography* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1989), xi.

<sup>2</sup> Harry Freedman, *Reason to Believe: The Controversial Life of Rabbi Louis Jacobs* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2021), 45.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>4</sup> A myth dispelled by R. Dr. Elliot Cosgrove's unpublished doctoral dissertation, "Teyku: The Insoluble Contradictions

in the Life and Thought of Louis Jacobs" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Freedman, *Reason to Believe*, 242.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 239-240.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>9</sup> In the case of Sacks, Freedman immediately goes on to note that "it is equally possible that Jacobs was completely

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wrong, and that Sacks no more agreed with him than did any other mainstream Orthodox thinker in England” (202).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>13</sup> Cosgrove, “Teyku,” 255.

<sup>14</sup> Freedman, *Reason to Believe*, 65.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 264.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>17</sup> Jacobs, *Helping with Inquiries*, 118-119.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>19</sup> <https://kavvanah.blog/2021/03/04/louis-jacobs-rabbi-benjamin-elton-responds-to-harry-freedman/>.

<sup>20</sup> Cosgrove, *Teyku*, 213-214.

<sup>21</sup> Louis Jacobs, *Beyond Reasonable Doubt* (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1999), ix.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 14. However, so prevalent is the myth of Jacobs’s continued identification with Orthodoxy that even Orthodox Rabbi Jeremy Rosen invoked it in his own review of Freedman’s biography, writing that Jacobs “remained strictly orthodox till his dying day. It was others who established what became the Masorti movement in the UK.”

<sup>23</sup> Freedman, *Reason to Believe*, 63-64.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>27</sup> Jacobs would later accuse the teacher who initially exposed him to such views as being “religiously schizophrenic” (though never using such explicit language) when said teacher signed a petition against his public stances. See Cosgrove, “Teyku,” 63-64.

<sup>28</sup> Louis Jacobs, *Principles of the Jewish Faith* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1964), 289-290.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 475.

<sup>30</sup> Louis Jacobs, *We Have Reason to Believe* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1957), 65.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 80-81.

<sup>32</sup> Jacobs, *Beyond Reasonable Doubt*, 50.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>35</sup> Here Jacobs has aligned himself with Solomon Schechter (whom he was fond of referencing throughout his works), who wrote that “when Revelation or the Written Word is reduced to the level of history, there is no difficulty in elevating Tradition to the rank of Scripture, for both have then the same human or divine origin.” Excerpted in Mordecai Waxman’s *Tradition and Change: The Development of the Conservative Movement* (New York: Burning Bush Press, 1958), 90.

<sup>36</sup> Jacobs, *Beyond Reasonable Doubt*, 126.

<sup>37</sup> Jacobs, *Principles of the Jewish Faith*, 299.

<sup>38</sup> As he articulates elsewhere, “The question of how the halakhah can function in the contemporary world, is, when all is said and done, a theological question.” Louis Jacobs, *A Tree of Life: Diversity, Flexibility, and Creativity in Jewish Law* (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1984), 231.

<sup>39</sup> Jacobs, *Beyond Reasonable Doubt*, 52.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 128-129.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 240. It should be noted that there is some debate as to whether Jacobs’s views on this particular subject evolved over time or were always a part of his theology. While this writer and others find it hard to believe that one such as Jacobs would be oblivious to the full implications of his theology during its initial conception and articulation, others have argued that he became more progressive in this regard over time (ultimately dropping the notion that his views should not impact one’s religious practice) as he moved farther away from institutional Orthodoxy.

<sup>42</sup> As cited in Benjamin Elton’s *Britain’s Chief Rabbis and the religious character of Anglo-Jewry, 1880–1970* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 242.

<sup>43</sup> In addition to all that was said above, it should be noted that Jacobs’s theology is not particularly consistent. Why believe in a personal God, afterlife, etc, but not believe in a direct revelation of ideas from that God to prophets?

<sup>44</sup> Cosgrove, “Teyku,” 350-352.

<sup>45</sup> Jacobs, *Helping With Inquiries*, 207.

<sup>46</sup> In his autobiography, Jacobs recounts being “told on good authority that even the members of the London Beth Din had urged the Chief Rabbi to accept the situation [or reappointment to the New West End], arguing that, whatever my views, they would be capable of doing no harm in a pulpit long recognised as being somewhat outside the normal United Synagogue in it’s ‘reformist’ tendencies.” Jacobs, *Helping with Inquiries*, 159.

<sup>47</sup> Freedman, *Reason to Believe*, 2.

<sup>48</sup> Some have argued that a similar state of affairs led to the complete break between American Orthodox and Conservative Judaism. As Professor Michael Cohen has written:

Though [Solomon] Schechter’s disciples sought unity in the image of Catholic Israel, they were nevertheless resoundingly rejected by the rest of the American Jewish world—particularly by rabbis in the OU and Agudath ha-Rabbanim. These rabbis cast aside the United Synagogue [of America] as an organization hostile to Orthodoxy precisely because it sought unity and

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welcomed anyone who wished to join—even if they did not follow Orthodox practices... in their quest for unity, Schechter's disciples were ironically forced by the right into a movement of their own. Michael Cohen, *The Birth of Conservative Judaism: Solomon Schechter's Disciples and the Creation of an American Religious Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 11.

<sup>49</sup> These questions are applicable even as recently as June 11, 2021, when England's *Jewish Chronicle* (Issue 7938) reported that Dr. Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz would be unable to continue teaching as a *London School of Jewish Studies*

**SHADAL: TRANSLATED, ELUCIDATED, AND UNCENSORED AT LAST**  
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**Review of *Samuel David Luzzatto's Interpretation of the Book of Vayikra*, translated and edited by Daniel A. Klein (New York: Kodesh Press, 2021)**

**S**amuel David Luzzatto (1800-1865), known as Shadal, has long provoked intrigue. He was the leading Italian Jewish scholar of the nineteenth century, yet he refused to be ordained as a rabbi himself, repeatedly declining the offer of his colleagues. He spent most of his life teaching in the Modern Orthodox rabbinical seminary in Padua, the *Collegio Rabbinico*, yet some contemporary readers who like to draw boundaries raise doubts about whether he could even be called Orthodox.<sup>1</sup> In fact, this question is not entirely the invention of moderns: although Shadal considered himself Orthodox, he wryly admitted that others might disagree. He understood, for example, that some critics would consider heterodox his understanding that much of the classical rabbis' "interpretation" of legal passages in the Torah was really legislation, not interpretation. Further, he was a respected member of Wissenschaft circles, committed to the academic study of

Research Fellow following her ordination from *Yeshivat Maharat*. Indeed, Maharat and its brother institution, *Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School*, have been seen as both practically and theologically suspect by the greater Orthodox communities in North America and Europe for some time. Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis has been understood to believe that they "[encourage] practices which run contrary to our normative United Synagogue approach." The LSJS, under the presidency of Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis and vice presidency of S&P Senior Rabbi Joseph Dweck, made clear that it followed the Chief Rabbi's opinion on the matter. Parallels between this situation and Jacobs's treatment by then Chief Rabbi Brodie should be obvious. The question remains: in both cases, was theirs the appropriate response?

Judaism, but at the same time was deeply opposed to a rationalist Greek philosophy, including Rambam's approach, on ethical grounds.

And yet, the abiding fascination with this vastly erudite Jew's life pales in comparison to the import of his written work. Shadal's prolific literary output included an insightful commentary on the Torah that was unique in its time and continues to speak to readers today. It focused on the *peshat* (the plain meaning) of the text and on the moral and religious messages that the *peshat* contains. That alone does not seem terribly unusual, but Shadal was also an expert in Hebrew and other Semitic languages. Well acquainted with the research of Jews, Christians, traditionalists, and critical scholars, he cited any source, kosher or otherwise, that helps advance our understanding of the biblical text. He was perhaps the first Torah commentator to draw liberally both from the writings of Bible critics and the traditional medieval Jewish commentators. Since his time, very few others have followed that path. A strong defender of the antiquity and divinity of the Torah, he still found insights in the interpretations of Jews and gentiles who did not share his beliefs.

Shadal's Hebrew-language Torah commentary was never published in his lifetime. In 1871, six years after his death, the first volume (*Bereishit*) of the commentary was assembled, compiled from transcripts of his lectures faithfully recorded by his students at the *Collegio Rabbinico*, and published together with his translation of the Torah into Italian. By 1875, all five volumes appeared.

In recent decades, Shadal's Torah commentary has achieved new-found popularity.<sup>2</sup> Academic studies about him include a full-length Hebrew book by Professor Shmuel Vargon of Bar Ilan University, *S. D. Luzzatto: Moderate Criticism in Biblical Exegesis* (2013). Outside of academia, Jews have also been studying the commentary more. Nehama Leibowitz, leading Bible teacher of the twentieth century, cited Shadal's commentary frequently, both orally and in her prolific writings.<sup>3</sup>

In 1965, Shadal's Hebrew Torah commentary was republished in a censored version that removed some of the passages where Shadal cited non-Orthodox sources. This censored text was translated into English in 2012, in an unhelpful edition that lacked explanatory notes. In 2015, a handsome five-volume edition of Shadal's Hebrew Torah commentary was published in Israel, edited by Yonatan Bassi (Carmel Books). This edition includes more of Shadal's comments than the 1871-1875 edition, taken from notes of his students, and shows how frequently he changed his mind over the years about the interpretation of the texts, a sure sign of his intellectual honesty. Sadly, this edition also lacked explanatory notes and was riddled with typos. Thanks to the work of Hillel Novetsky, a better Hebrew edition of the commentary is now [online](#).

A true scholarly achievement in the field is the work of Daniel A. Klein, a lawyer who, on the side, has been methodically translating Shadal's Torah commentary into English for the last 23 years. His third volume, *Samuel David Luzzatto's Interpretation of the Book of Vayikra* (New York: Kodesh Press, 2021), was just published. His work, which hopefully will eventually comprise Shadal's complete Torah commentary in a five-volume set, includes a number of helpful features. He is the first Shadal scholar to include a translation of Shadal's Italian translation of the Torah with his commentary. By translating Shadal's Italian into readable English, Klein performs a real service for us non-Italian readers. This is especially useful in the newest volume, as Shadal, like many of his traditional predecessors, had considerably less to say about Leviticus than about the previous books of the Torah. At times, dozens of verses in a row have no commentary at all. Since, as we know, every translation is in effect a commentary, English readers can at

least see how, on the most basic level, Shadal understood those verses.

Klein makes another contribution here by including a series of short scholarly essays that contain a discussion of Shadal's Orthodoxy—including an analysis of Shadal's ostensibly non-Orthodox position about shaving with a razor—and a translation of a lengthy but interesting Italian letter that Shadal wrote to a spiritual seeker. And finally, Klein's edition contains explanatory notes, which are especially helpful for understanding Shadal's frequent references or allusions to other writings (both his own and those of his contemporaries) that few of us have on our bookshelves.

Unusually for the annotated translation genre, Klein sometimes goes off on tangents. He shares his research on *tzaraat* (generally translated as "leprosy"), which extends far beyond what is necessary for understanding Shadal. Surprisingly, he even occasionally takes issue with or expands on Shadal's commentary. To give one example, Shadal explains the reason behind the laws against brother-sister incest, writing (Klein's translation of the [commentary to Leviticus 18:6](#)):

The prohibition of taking one's sister seems to be based on the wellbeing of the state, for if taking a sister were permitted, most men would marry their sisters, each family would thus become a people unto itself, the families would not intermarry or mix with each other, and the nation would not become one people, but would turn into many peoples that would be distant from each other and not love one another.

Klein notes: "Shadal's view corresponds to the position later taken by, among others, Sigmund Freud, who claimed that 'psychoanalytic investigations have shown beyond the possibility of doubt that an incestuous love choice is in fact the first and regular one.'" Klein goes on: "However, this view has been contested by others, including researchers who found that there was a complete absence of love affairs or marriages between males and females who were raised from childhood in the same communal children's facilities on Israeli kibbutzim, and that such avoidance was entirely voluntary," and he provides a reference to a recent scholarly book on the subject.<sup>4</sup>

As someone who loves, respects, and studies Shadal's commentary, I have used all the available versions at different times. Klein's edition is the easiest to use—



obviously for those English speakers who need help coping with the Hebrew text—but it is also helpful to Hebrew readers.

Klein himself realizes the irony of making Shadal’s work so available to English readers. He writes that the fact that his book was “necessary in order to bring his work into broad public notice . . . is one that the author himself would have found deeply disappointing. Shadal had a ‘burning zeal for the Hebrew language,’ holding that its revival was ‘essential to the preservation of the honor of the Jewish people,’ and considering it ‘vital to the understanding of the Bible to gain

full mastery of the Hebrew idiom in all its phases.” Indeed, Shadal once received a letter in German from his younger contemporary, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, to which he reacted by writing a sarcastic ditty, in Hebrew, making fun of Hirsch. Shadal, the Renaissance man, read German fluently. But he expected that rabbis would write to each other in Hebrew.

Nevertheless, the Jewish world, including the Orthodox part, now contains many functionally unilingual, English-only Jews. It’s a significant gain for them to be able to enjoy Shadal’s creative, in-depth Torah commentary that combines traditional and modern approaches to the Bible.

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g., <https://www.torahmusings.com/2016/01/shadal-and-the-orthodox-canon/>.

<sup>2</sup> Earlier studies in English include: Noah H. Rosenbloom, *Luzzatto’s Ethico-Psychological Interpretation of Judaism* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1965); and Morris B. Margolies, *Samuel David Luzzatto: Traditionalist Scholar* (New York: Ktav, 1979).

<sup>3</sup> Usually Leibowitz admired Shadal, but from time to time she was unusually sharp in her criticism. For example, see her *Iyyunim be-Sefer Devarim*, 210-211, where she takes strong issue with [Shadal’s explanation of Deuteronomy 22:6-7](#). For a brief discussion of Leibowitz and Shadal, and of the question of Shadal’s Orthodoxy, see my article [here](#).

<sup>4</sup> Freudian or not, Shadal’s comment on brother-sister incest is surprisingly similar to the theory proposed in the fourteenth century by Rabbi Nissim of Marseilles in his Torah commentary. Nissim writes (my translation):

Perhaps the reason why incest is forbidden is in order to cause unrelated people in the same country to marry each other. The result of this will be an increase in the feelings of love and closeness in the country; it will lead to the country becoming like one family. The country will

not be divided into separate warring factions. Plato taught that the best state is one where people consider each other brothers. . . . In the end, we are all brothers in any case. We all ultimately come from one mother and one father. That is why it is a requirement for all countries that families should marry each other so that the state will become united and it will not be divided into factions and fighting groups, “So that the land will not spew you out.” ([Leviticus 18:28](#))

Nissim’s commentary was available only in manuscript until it was published in 2000 in a volume edited by Professor Haim Kreisel of Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. It is possible that Shadal’s extensive research in manuscripts extended even to this relatively obscure work, or, more likely, he and Nissim came up with the same idea independently. See also the thirteenth-century commentary of Nahmanides (Ramban) who writes (in his [commentary to Leviticus 18:6](#)) that, were it not for Torah law, “No marriage would be as appropriate as for a man to marry off his daughter to her older brother. He could then give them his estate as inheritance, and they would be fruitful and multiply in his home.”

## THE VOICE AND THE SWORD: A META-NARRATIVE IN RASHI

DAN JUTAN co-founded the College Beit Midrash of Atlanta.

*And Moses cried out to the LORD, saying, "God, please! Heal her, please!" (Numbers 12:13)*

*This essay is dedicated to all those in need of healing and to the mental health community. May the Creator and Sustainer heal those who are suffering, and may those living with mental illness be empowered to find their voice.*

.....

*Hear our voice, Lord our God, pity us and have mercy on us and receive in mercy and favor our prayer. (Amidah)*

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Rashi's classic Commentary on the Torah is often read as a series of local comments, as explanations to resolve textual difficulties on individual verses. This mindset is illustrated by the perennial question: "What's bothering Rashi?" Asked by super-commentaries ranging from *Sifte Hahamim* to Nechama Leibowitz, this question focuses the reader on the problems Rashi comes to solve with his aggadic, halakhic, or exegetical quotes.

However, Rashi is a reader of Tanakh, not just of its verses. His view of the beginning of a narrative informs his comments throughout it, and his portrayal<sup>1</sup> of a character in one narrative reflects his general understanding of the character elsewhere. He forms continuous narratives<sup>2</sup> as well as meta-narratives: collections of comments spread throughout narratives, between characters, and across Biblical books that can be read together to tell a new story.<sup>3</sup>

This essay will present an expansive pattern that emerges from several of Rashi's comments in Genesis and Numbers. Rashi identifies two motifs which he uses to characterize Biblical characters and nations. The voice is Jacob's identifying feature. Blessed by Isaac, it reappears generations later as Moses's chief characteristic and the Nation of Israel's key strength. Esau, on the other hand, is blessed with the power of a strong hand and with the life of the sword. The sword becomes a symbol of strength for both Edom and the Nations and represents their primary approach to resolving conflict.

By tracing Rashi's references to these strengths—the voice and the sword—throughout his commentary, we can

develop a meta-narrative: a larger story that cuts across these Biblical narratives. This new framework illuminates other Biblical narratives and—perhaps more importantly—highlights a critical element of our national identity and offers a new paradigm to understand our history.<sup>4</sup>

We'll start with the Book of Numbers. The Book's focus on the Children of Israel and their leaders pauses for *Parashat Balak*, a narrative excursion that departs from the newly formed nation to provide a vital perspective: the outside one. Its unbroken columns feature not the children of Israel but Balaam, the son of Beor, an anti-hero and diviner<sup>5</sup>—and prophet,<sup>6</sup> poet,<sup>7</sup> and philosopher.<sup>8</sup> Rashi describes this character at the start of *Parashat Balak*:

*The land of the children of the people— . . . And if you ask: Why did the Holy One blessed be He, rest his Shekhina upon an evil heathen (goy rasha)? — In order that the nations have no excuse to say, "If we had prophets, we would have changed for the better," He raised up prophets for them. And they breached a fence in the world, as, initially, they were fenced in from sexual immorality (arayot), and this one (Balaam) advised them to give themselves over to whoredom (znut). (Rashi, Numbers 22:5)*

Balaam is a foil to Moses. Appointed for justice's sake,<sup>9</sup> he compels the Nations to injustice, and is thus described by the Rabbis and Rashi as evil (*rasha*). His power comes from his prophetic voice, which he uses to instigate sin rather than to ward it off; he misuses his voice, a gift that, too, mirrors Moses:

*(And Moab said) to the Elders of Midian — . . . And what induced Moab to take counsel of Midian? When they saw that Israel was victorious in a supernatural manner (she-lo ke-minhag ha-olam), they said: the leader of these people grew up in Midian; let us ask them what is his (chief) characteristic (midato). They said to them; "His power lies only in his mouth." They said: "Then we must come against them with a person whose power lies in his mouth." (Rashi, Numbers 22:4)*

This Rashi is the first anchor for our meta-narrative. While Balaam's poetic oracles hone in on the key features—humility, majesty, godliness—that define the Israelites<sup>10</sup> (so much so that the Rabbis incorporated his words into our liturgy<sup>11</sup>), his own character and actions serve as a foil that helps us better understand our people; and in this case, our greatest, most iconic and formative prophet and leader. Upon reflection, it is no surprise—regarding the leader

whose supplications saved the nation from destruction time and time again, who had face-to-face conversations with God, who composed two iconic songs<sup>12</sup> and delivered a speech that became a Book of the Torah itself—that Moses’s chief utility is the “power in his mouth”—his voice.<sup>13</sup>

By venturing through Rashi’s commentary, we can develop this further. Moses’s *midah*, his chief characteristic, is not unique to his character; Moses’s skill reflects, as we will see, a feature of our national identity throughout the generations.

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Immediately after the incident of the Waters of Merivah in *Parashat Hukat*, the nation sets out towards the land of Canaan, but must first pass through the territory of other nations. Rather than immediately resorting to war, Moses tries his hand at diplomacy, sending messengers to the king of Edom. They begin by referring to Israel as Edom’s brother. Rashi comments:

*Your brother Israel* — What reason had he to mention here their brotherhood? But in effect he said to him: We are brothers, sons of Abraham, to whom it was said (Genesis 15:13) “You shall surely know that your seed shall be a stranger [in a land not theirs],” and upon both of us, being of Abraham’s seed, was the duty of paying that debt.

*You know all the hardships* — It was on this account that your father separated himself from our father, as it is said (Genesis 36:6), “And he (Esau) went to another land on account of Jacob, his brother” — because of the responsibility (*shtar hov*) which was placed upon both of them, which he (Esau) placed onto Jacob. (Rashi, Numbers 20:14)

Rashi connects Biblical passages by hooking onto Moses’s language, which calls Israel Edom’s *brother*. He hearkens back to the Jacob and Esau story and to the bookends of the patriarchal narrative: at the first end, the covenant between God and Abram (*brit bein ha-betarim*); at the last, the final mention of either Esau or Jacob before the start of the Joseph narrative in *Parashat Va-yeshev*. Rashi masterfully ties both ends together, suggesting that Esau’s final departure is because of God’s promise to Abram: Esau wishes to avoid the burden placed upon Abram’s descendants.

Rashi’s callback floods the reader with textual memories, inviting the reader to recall the original relationship of Jacob

and Esau, with its heated trickery and its fraternal complexity.<sup>14</sup> The verses and Rashi continue:

(16) We cried to the LORD and He heard our voice, and He sent a messenger who freed us from Egypt. Now we are in Kadesh, the town on the border of your territory.  
(17) Allow us, then, to cross your country. . .  
(Numbers 20)

*He heard our voice* — through the blessing with which our father, Jacob, had blessed<sup>15</sup> us — “the voice is Jacob’s voice” (*hakol kol Yaakov*; Genesis 27:22), because whenever we cry we are answered. (Rashi, Numbers 20:16)

We now begin to see a deeper narrative take form. Earlier, Rashi similarly described Moses as one who is “assured that any time he wishes he can speak to the Shekhinah” (Rashi, Numbers 9:7). The *midah* of Moses parallels that of the Nation of Israel, which had derived it from Jacob. This idea—of a defining skill echoing through the generations—is developed further by Rashi on Numbers 20:18:

(18) But Edom answered him, “You shall not pass through us, else we will go out against you with the sword.”

*Else we will go out against you with the sword.* You pride yourselves on the voice which your father bequeathed you as a blessing, saying, “And we cried unto the Lord and He heard our voice.” I, therefore, will come out against you with that which my father bequeathed me when he said, (Genesis 27:40) “And by your sword you shall live.” (Rashi, Numbers 20:18)

The reader is vaulted to the height of the tension between Jacob and Esau, that of Isaac’s blessing, and a new side of the narrative is revealed. Jacob was blessed with the voice—the “power in the mouth” as Rashi refers to it later. Esau was blessed too. His chief characteristic was not the voice but the sword—physical power.

But they replied, “You shall not pass through!” And Edom went out against them in heavy force and with a strong hand. (Numbers 20:20)

*And with a strong hand* — with the assurance<sup>16</sup> of our ancestor: (Genesis 27:22) “and the hands are the hands of Esau (*ha-yadayim y’dai Esav*).” (Rashi on Numbers 20:20)

The motif of Esau's gift of physical power continues in the above Rashi, mirroring the Rashi on Numbers 20:18. This motif—symbolized by the sword—reflects Rashi's views on Esau earlier in the text.<sup>17</sup>

We have thus discovered a meta-narrative in Rashi: a pair of characteristics beginning with Jacob's and Esau's blessings, developing through their lives and interactions, reappearing in their descendant nations' further encounters, and concentrated in their leadership. The next section will explore how we can read this meta-narrative into Biblical stories.

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Jacob's power of the voice remains separate from Esau's power of the sword. We rarely see Jacob using physical force; he operates using verbal trickery and diplomacy. But it does not take long for Esau's gift to tempt the Israelite family. The events in Genesis 34 at Shechem present a hybrid approach amongst Jacob's sons:

Jacob's sons answered Shechem and his father Hamor—speaking with guile (*mirmah*) because he had defiled their sister Dinah. (Genesis 34:13. See the description of Jacob himself in Genesis 27:35)

... Their words pleased Hamor and Hamor's son Shechem. (Genesis 34:18)

*With guile*—cleverly.<sup>18</sup> (Rashi's identical comment on both Genesis 27:35 and Genesis 34:18)

Although the brothers initiate their plan with the power of voice that they have inherited from their father (as shown by Rashi's identical comments by Jacob and his sons) Simeon and Levi carry it out using the sword:<sup>19</sup>

On the third day, when they were in pain, Simeon and Levi, two of Jacob's sons, brothers of Dinah, each with his sword, came upon the city confidently and slew all the males. They put Hamor and his son Shechem to the sword, took Dinah out of Shechem's house, and went away. (Genesis 34:25-26)

Jacob is upset by their actions, concerned that they have incited the neighboring tribes to violence. The narrative itself does not choose a side, leaving the reader to reflect. Does any circumstance justify the sword?

Perhaps, in this case, the power in the mouth was not powerful enough. Perhaps the voice and its capabilities—guile, diplomacy, persuasion, prayer—can only go so far.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, the approach in *Parashat Hukat* begins with the voice, as Israel seeks passage through Edom with diplomacy. Moses sends messengers to Edom, as Jacob sent to Esau generations earlier,<sup>21</sup> to seek peace and cooperation. But when this fails, the nation simply turns away.<sup>22</sup>

In Chapter 21, this attitude changes. When the King of Arad physically attacks the people, diplomacy is no longer an option. But this does not mean that the voice is exhausted. Israel moves to action, demonstrating the power in the mouth in one of the most weighty actions a voice can do in Judaism:<sup>23</sup>

Then Israel made a vow to the LORD and said, "If You deliver this people into our hand, we will proscribe their towns." (Numbers 21:2)

Then—echoing the language regarding Egypt in Numbers 20:16—God listens:

The LORD listened to Israel's voice and delivered up the Canaanites; and they and their cities were proscribed. So that place was named Hormah. (Numbers 21:3)

The voice does not always completely serve the nation's goals as it does here. But throughout *Parashat Hukat*, Israel elects to use the voice before the sword.<sup>24</sup>

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*Why were so few voices raised in the ancient world in protest against the ruthlessness of man? Why are human beings so obsequious, ready to kill and ready to die at the call of kings and chieftains? Perhaps it is because they worship might, venerate those who command might, and are convinced that it is by force that man prevails.* (Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets*, Chapter 9)

The blessing of Isaac unto Jacob becomes Jacob's chief characteristic. The voice of Jacob then funnels through the generations, becoming the voice of Israel and Moses's "power in the mouth." Esau's blessing—the power of the sword—funnels, too, through history, becoming Edom's inheritance.

Rashi expands this beyond Edom.<sup>25</sup> The power of the sword—as exemplified by the ruthless Canaanite violence in

*Parashat Hukat*—is the weapon not just of Edom, but of the non-Israelite nations.<sup>26</sup> The success of Israel in *Parashat Hukat* proves the triumph of the voice over the sword.

This dynamic is picked up by Balak and Midian. Ammon failed. Bashan failed. They opted for the sword. It's time, thought Balak, to try something new.<sup>27</sup>

Balaam's attempt to weaponize the power in the mouth—a unique attribute of Moses and Israel inherited from their ancestors—was destined for failure. This power simply isn't his. A final Rashi rounds out the meta-narrative:

And the donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way, with his drawn sword in his hand . . . (Numbers 22:23)

*And his sword drawn in his hand* —He (God) said: This evil one has abandoned the tools of his trade, — for the offensive weapons of the nations of the world consist of the sword, and he is attacking them with his mouth which is their specialty (*omanut*); I will seize what is his and come against him with his own specialty (*omanuto*). Thus, indeed, was his end (Numbers 31:8): “And Balaam the son of Beor they slew by the sword.” (Rashi on Numbers 22:23)

God comes to Balaam with a sword in the angel's hand—the sword that should be in Balaam's hand. The weapon he ignores comes to stop him on the way and warn him: *the mouth belongs to Israel who pray to Hashem, but not to you.*<sup>28</sup>

Balaam doesn't listen. His ironic fate is to be killed by Israel as *they* take the sword to slay him.<sup>29</sup>

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*And the voice of the shofar (kol shofar) became increasingly louder; Moses spoke, and God answered him by voice.* (Exodus 19:19)

*And on that day, a great shofar shall be sounded; and the strayed who are in the land of Assyria and the expelled who are in the land of Egypt shall come*

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<sup>1</sup> Through his quoting and rephrasing of Rabbinic texts.

In this essay, when Rashi quotes the Rabbis, for brevity's sake and by common convention I attribute the statement

*and worship the LORD on the holy mount, in Jerusalem.* (Isaiah 27:13)

The Jewish People has often been described in terms of our holy texts. The Torah, and later, the Talmud, have comprised our timeless, traveling homeland, functioning as “compact, transferable history, law, wisdom, poetic chant, prophecy, consolation and self-strengthening counsel,”<sup>30</sup> keeping us together against the eroding onrush of time.

This meta-narrative shows that before the Book, we were the People of the Voice. Rashi takes two verses in Genesis-- 27:22 (*the voice is the voice of Jacob*) and 27:40 (*and by your sword you shall live*)—masterfully mapping them on other narratives through his comments. These connections are not my own—as we have shown, Rashi's comments by Edom and by Balak explicitly use these verses to apply the archetype to Edom, Israel, Moses, Balaam, and the Nations. With this paradigm in place, we can understand the identity of our patriarch, our leader, and our people, using it to read other narratives—Shechem for Jacob and his children, the Waters of Merivah for Moses,<sup>31</sup> and the conquests in *Parashat Hukat* for the Nation of Israel. But we can also use it to understand Jewish history itself.

Jacob's *berakhah*, Moses's *midah*, and the Children of Israel's *omanut*—we used it to cry, to persuade, to swear; to declare, to celebrate to sing; to accept, to teach, to pray; striving throughout history to maintain our voice through songs, laws, and stories. The voice of Israel became that of its prophets, listening to the still, small voice of God and proclaiming that voice to the people. The prophetic voice became the voice of the Rabbis, the voice of the schoolhouse and the voice of the *minyan*, the voice of the halakhic *makhloket* and the voice of the aggadic *derashah*. The national voice became the voice of exile, the proclamations of the martyr and the shouts of the mourner. Today, the voice of dispersion sings in cacophony with the voice of the returned people—both voices are proud and confident, if out of sync.

While the Book provides the source material, the Voice brings it to the world. We are a People of the Book, but the voice is our trade. May the ever-growing Jewish voice soon usher in the *kol shofar*—the voice of redemption.

to Rashi. For readability, I have also refrained from providing Rashi's sources, as many Rashi publications include inline. I do not mean to suggest that Rashi singularly invented his statements. (However, I would like to point out

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that Rashi makes a point when choosing one Rabbinic text over another and when tweaking them in his rewriting of sources.)

<sup>2</sup> An example regarding Yehoshua reads Rashi on Deuteronomy 3:28 s.v. “ki hu ya’avor”, in light of his comment on Numbers 27:17, s.v. “asher yatza lifneihem.” This can be expanded to a metanarrative about a leader’s role in battle by including Rashi’s comment on 14:6, s.v. “v-et amo lakah imo.”

<sup>3</sup> For an example of a meta-narrative across characters within the same Biblical book, read Rashi on Genesis 32:8 (s.v. “va-yira va-yetzer”) with Rashi on Genesis 42:14 (s.v. “hu asher dibarti”). For a meta-narrative between a character in a book in Humash and another in the Prophets, read Rashi on Numbers 16:15 (s.v. “lo hamor ehad me-hem nasati”) with Rashi on 1 Samuel 12:3 (s.v. “v-hamor mi lakhti”). Unlike the last example, Rashi explicitly ties these two together with his comment on Numbers 16:7 (s.v. “rav lakhem b’nei levi”). (Thanks to Dov Greenwood and the rest of our Rashi *Iyun* group from my Shana Aleph at Yeshivat Har Etzion. Together, we developed a passion for Rashi’s Commentary on the Torah and methodologies for reading it that have inspired me spiritually and intellectually. This essay provides only a small taste of the rich methodology and library of examples we have collected.)

<sup>4</sup> The ability to reapply itself is a key aspect of a *meta-narrative*—it is not just another narrative, but an overarching paradigm for narratives; a story of stories.

<sup>5</sup> Joshua 13:22 describes Balaam as a *kosem*.

<sup>6</sup> See *Bava Batra* 15b; *Bamidbar Rabbah* 20; the first comment of Rashi in Numbers 22:6; and Rashbam ad loc.

<sup>7</sup> Balaam’s prophecies are in Biblical verse and are introduced uniquely: “*Va-yissa mishelo va-yomar...*” For a fascinating analysis of one of Balaam’s poems, see J.P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2001), 69-70. (Thanks to Dov Greenwood for bringing this to my attention.)

<sup>8</sup> *Pesikta D-Rav Kahana* 15.

<sup>9</sup> See the beginning of *Bamidbar Rabbah*, 20, which suggests that the nations were given a prophet, Balaam, due to God’s desire for justice. “And Balak son of Zippor saw—The Torah says (Deuteronomy 32) ‘The Rock—perfect is His work for all of His ways are justice.’ . . .”

<sup>10</sup> See Numbers 24:9 which reflects—almost word for word—Isaac’s defining blessing to Jacob in Genesis 27:30.

<sup>11</sup> The *Mah Tov* prayer.

<sup>12</sup> The Song of the Sea and *Shirat Ha’azinu*.

<sup>13</sup> Moses’s statement in Exodus 6:30, “See, I am of impeded speech (*aral sefatayim*),” poses an interesting challenge to our argument that can be resolved with either local *parshanut* or with a broader understanding of Moses’s character development.

<sup>14</sup> We may point out a creative reading that can be gleaned from Rashi’s innovation here. This final mention of Esau’s movement recalls the previous one, three chapters earlier: he sets out to Seir (a key location in Edom, often used interchangeably with it), inviting Jacob to join him. Jacob responds that because of his children and animals he is too slow to keep pace—he will catch up later, he says. But Jacob does not follow Esau to Seir, and instead settles in Sukkoth, and then Shechem. He does not keep his word. Now, Jacob’s descendants are asking Esau’s for help, and Rashi seeks, perhaps, to justify that request in the face of Jacob’s disloyalty.

<sup>15</sup> It is interesting to note that at this part of the narrative, which is the lead-up to the actual blessing, Isaac’s statement is considered a blessing. It seems that Rashi reads this descriptive, local statement (“The voice [that I hear now] is Jacob’s voice”) as a prescriptive, global one: “*the* voice (i.e., the gift of the voice) is (and shall be) Jacob’s voice.”

<sup>16</sup> See footnote 15. Note the difference in language between Jacob’s blessing (*berakhah*) and Esau’s assurance (*havtahah*). This appears to be Rashi’s own choice; his Rabbinic source—*Midrash Tanhuma*, *Be-shalah* 9—uses neither.

<sup>17</sup> See Rashi on Genesis 27:3, which reads an ambiguous implement as a sword, and Rashi on Genesis 25:29, which reads Esau as a murderer.

<sup>18</sup> *B’hokhmah*; alternately, “with wisdom.” I read this as a light endorsement or approval of the behavior.

<sup>19</sup> For a further bifurcation of the two strategies, see Ramban on Genesis 34:13.

<sup>20</sup> Note Jacob’s silence in Genesis 34:5.

<sup>21</sup> Compare Genesis 32:5 with Numbers 20:4.

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<sup>22</sup> Numbers 20:21.

<sup>23</sup> See Numbers 30:3.

<sup>24</sup> See Numbers 21:21-24, where they first use diplomatic tools with Sihon, and only upon Sihon's engaging in violence does Israel use the sword.

<sup>25</sup> See Rashi on Numbers 31:8, quoted below, which applies the same verse that tied Esau to Edom—"by your sword you shall live"—to the nations of the world.

<sup>26</sup> *Tanhuma Be-shalah* 9, Rashi on Numbers 22:23 (quoted below), and Rashi on Numbers 31:8.

<sup>27</sup> See Rashi on Number 22:4, quoted above.

<sup>28</sup> *Siftei akhamim*, ad loc.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Rashi on Numbers 31:8. Reminiscent of Simeon and Levi's role in Shechem *vis-à-vis* Jacob, Phineas—the iconic, violent zealot—oversees this campaign, rather than Moses himself (Numbers 31:6).

<sup>30</sup> Simon Schama, *The Story of the Jews: Finding the Words 1000 BC – 1492 AD* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2013), Chapter Two.

<sup>31</sup> See Rashi on Numbers 20:11. Moses hits the rock, using his hands (Esau's blessing) rather than his voice—his own specialty—as he was commanded.

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