

For the Sake of the Righteous: Divine Love and Human Responsibility in *Bereshit Rabbah*

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Abstract

Rabbinic Judaism is classically understood to have defined the love of God as adherence to religious law, or *halakah*. This paper examines alternative midrashic understandings of the commandment to love God (Deut. 6:5) through an analysis of passages from the *Sifre to Deuteronomy* and *Bereshit Rabba*, each of which ground their understanding of this commandment within the narrative of creation. It then considers how this midrashic approach, which frames its understanding of this commandment through emotional language and a focus on righteous or idealized behavior, both complements and is in tension with the more legalistic approach offered in the Talmud.

Keywords: *Bereshit Rabba*, midrash, *halakhah*, Deuteronomy 6:5, *Sifre to Deuteronomy*, *Shema*.

The opening paragraph of the *Shema*, one of the central prayers in the Jewish tradition, commands “you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut. 6:5).¹ Such a mandate, while compelling, is also troubling. What does it mean to love God and how can one be expected to do so? Classically, rabbinic Judaism has resolved this issue by defining the love of God as the fulfillment of certain actions, rather than as an emotional or spiritual state. In the Talmud, arguments that discuss the commandment to love God consistently demonstrate that this verse was understood as a charge to observe *halakhah*, or Jewish law, even under

¹ All translations mine, unless otherwise noted. Biblical translations are based on the Hebrew text as presented in *The JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003). The text of the *Shema* is comprised of three biblical selections: Deut. 6:4-9, Deut. 11:13-21 and Num. 15:37-41.

extreme circumstances.² And yet, while this interpretation may have been prominent, such an understanding was not exclusive.³ Within midrashic literature, there exists an alternative approach to this issue, one which seeks first to cultivate an emotional relationship between the individual and God and only subsequently to ground human action within this relationship.⁴

In his comments on this verse from the *Shema* in the *Sifre to Deuteronomy*, Rabbi Yehudah haNasi articulates the dilemma posed by the

² Cf. *Sanhedrin* 74a. In the context of a legal conversation about the prohibition to transgress Jewish law and engage in idol worship, even at the risk to one's life, the Talmud cites the following teaching in the name of R. Eliezer: " 'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might'" (Deut. 6:5). Since 'with all your soul' is stated, why does it state 'with all your might'? If 'with all your might' is written, why also write 'with all your soul'? For the man for whom life is more precious than wealth, 'with all your soul' is written, while the one for whom wealth is more precious than life is bidden 'with all your might.'" R. Eliezer's exegesis of this verse within the context of *Sanhedrin* makes clear that loving God is understood to mean adhering to the teachings and laws of the Torah—both those written in the *Tanakh* and those interpreted via the Oral Torah of the rabbinic sages—even if it means great personal sacrifice. This concept is reiterated several times in rabbinic lore and teachings, including *Yoma* 82a and *Berakhot* 61b, which details the martyrdom of R. Akiva. For further discussion of how this verse is employed in Talmudic literature, see also Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 125-27.

³ Furthermore, the decision to define love as a set of actions rather than as an emotion was not an unusual one during this period, nor was it exclusive to the command to love God. A similar interpretive move can be seen in both Jewish and early Christian commentaries on the commandment to love one's neighbor (Lev. 19:18, Matthew 22:34-40, Mark 12:28-34 and Luke 10:25-28).

⁴ The language that I use to describe how the midrash engages its audience is not native to the rabbinic texts themselves. Although such texts frequently display an awareness of their audience as embodied human subjects with emotions and desires, I am not aware of a rabbinic term that directly parallels the concept of an "emotional relationship" between the sage and God. Despite the risk of projecting modern concepts anachronistically onto the texts at hand, I have chosen to retain this language because I believe it is helpful for explaining certain terms that *are* indigenous to rabbinic discourse and which are central to the discussion at hand, such as the love of God (or *Ahavat haShem*). I thus will use the term "emotional relationship" as a way of highlighting the key dimensions that I understand to be operative in the midrashic exploration of the idea that God loves humanity and that humanity, too, must love God. It is my hope that the application of such concepts and language, while not native to the rabbinic worldview, will nevertheless provide what Jonathan Schofer has described as "a pragmatic starting point for thinking about particular teachings and their arrangements, connections and contrasts." See Jonathan Wyn Schofer, "Rabbinic Ethical Formation and the Formulation of Rabbinic Ethical Compilations," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 313-335.

commandment to love God succinctly.⁵ He begins by objecting, “I do not know how to love God” before offering the following resolution:

Therefore, the Torah teaches “These words which I am commanding to you today shall be on your heart (Deut. 6:6).” Put these words on your heart so that through them, you will recognize the One who spoke and the world was created, and you will cleave to His ways.⁶

This resolution suggests that in order to love God, one first needs to situate oneself in relationship to God as Creator. It is only through reflection on this particular relationship between humankind and God that one comes to know *how* to love God—by “cleav[ing] to His ways.”⁷

Rabbi Yehudah haNasi here appears to reach a similar conclusion to that of the Talmud. Love of God either consists of, or is expressed by, the observance of God’s teachings and laws. And yet, despite these apparent similarities, I propose that this midrashic understanding of the commandment to love God gives a significantly different shape to the rabbinic religious experience and its attendant practices. By grounding its understanding of the commandment to love God within the paradigm of creation, the midrash attempts to cultivate in its reader a response of awe, gratitude and loyalty towards his Creator by accentuating the radical inequality between humankind and God. Although the text clearly aims to translate this emotional response into a set of behaviors, “cleav[ing] to [God’s] ways,” it is not clear that the actions suggested by this phrase can be equated with *halakhic* observance. Rather, I propose that the use of this vocabulary signals a desire to move beyond a legalistic understanding of what it means to love God.

This paper aims to explore the potential effects of this midrashic approach to the challenge of loving God, and its implications for rabbinic practice, by investigating the contours of the relationship between humanity and God on which R. Yehudah haNasi concentrates. I focus my analysis here on a selection of midrash found in *Bereshit Rabba*, each of which comments on the creation of humanity in Genesis 1:26. Although these midrash do not make

⁵ The *Sifre to Deuteronomy* is a collection of halakhic midrash from the Tannaitic period (c. 10-200CE). Rabbi Yehudah haNasi, often referred to simply as “Rabbi,” was a prominent rabbinic sage from this period, and is credited with the redaction of the Mishnah in c. 200CE.

⁶ Piska 33 in A. A. Finkelstein, ed., *Sifre to the Book of Deuteronomy* (New York: Beit Midrash for Rabbis in America, 1993), 59.

⁷ In Hebrew, this phrase reads ומדבק בדבריו. Students of kabbalistic or Hasidic thought may note that this root, דבק, is the same as the concept of דבקות (*devekut*). Within rabbinic literature, however, the term does not have the same mystical connotations. It typically refers either to physical attachment (joining, affixing, bonding) or to a more abstract sense attachment (such as the ‘adherence’ to God’s ways described in this passage).

direct reference to the praying of the *Shema*, Deuteronomy 6:5 or the commandment to love God more generally, they do attempt to illuminate the relationship between God and humanity by focusing on the moment of creation. Through a series of vivid illustrations, these passages encourage the reader to cast himself into the narrative of creation. In so doing, I argue that they seek to evoke in their reader an emotional response to God's decision to create humanity— and, by extension, to create the reader himself. Through this response, the midrash cultivates within its reader a sense of loyalty and even responsibility towards God.

I begin with an exploration of these midrash from *Bereshit Rabba*, paying attention to the construction of the each midrashic narrative as well as its potential effects upon its reader. I consider the interpretive strategies employed by each midrashic author, or *darshan*, and how they affect both the structure and content of these passages. Having taken account of each midrash on its own terms, I then return to a consideration of our verse from the *Shema* and explore how the midrashic depictions of the moment of human creation can inform our understanding of R. Yehudah haNasi's approach to the commandment to love God. Finally, I examine how this midrashic approach both complements and is in tension with the Talmudic approach, and consider the implications of this tension for how the rabbinic community may have understood and attempted to fulfill this commandment.

Before beginning my analysis of these passages from *Bereshit Rabba*, however, it may be helpful to clarify certain elements of the approach taken in this paper. I confine my analysis to an exploration of how the different texts considered here might have been received historically by a rabbinic audience.⁸

⁸ Since the *Sifre to Deuteronomy* is a Tannaitic work, the teachings contained therein were most likely accessible to both the authors and audience of the Babylonian Talmud and *Bereshit Rabba*. Although the dating of *Bereshit Rabba* is contested, scholarly consensus seems to be that the bulk of the text as we have it today had already been compiled in Palestine by the end of the fifth century. Cf. Moshe David Herr and Stephen G. Wald, "Genesis Rabbah," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Vol. 7, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Frank Skolnik (Detroit: MacMillan Reference USA, 2007), 448-449; the interested reader may also wish to see Hans-Jürgen Becker, "Texts and History: The Dynamic Relationship between Talmud Yerushalmi and Genesis Rabbah," in *The Synoptic Problem in Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Cohen Shaye, 145-158 (Providence: Brown Judaic Studies, 2000), 145-158; Chaim Milikowsky, "On the Formation and Transmission of Bereshit Rabba and the Yerushalmi: Questions of Redactions, Text-Criticism and Literary Relationships," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 92, no. 3-4 (Jan-Apr 2002): 521-567 and Bernard J. Bamberger, "The Dating of Aggadic Materials," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 68, no. 2 (June 1949): 115-123. For a discussion of how midrashic materials may have been employed by the rabbinic community in this historical context, see Rachel Anisfeld, *Sustain Me with Raisin-Cakes: Pesikta de-Rav Kahana and the Popularization of Rabbinic Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

When referring to the effect of certain narrative elements upon the audience or reader, I therefore assume a reader who was a member of that historical community, perhaps a rabbinic disciple or student at one of the early rabbinic academies. As a result, I assume a male reader and also use masculine terminology for God, following the language used in the texts under consideration. I also assume a basic commonality of worldview between the authors and readers of these texts, a worldview which included the assumption of divine benevolence, a concern about the nature of humanity and its potential to fall into wickedness or error, and a desire to uphold and follow a rabbinic understanding of religious law.

Let Us Make Humankind

Our selection from *Bereshit Rabba* begins by focusing on the famously problematic phrase in Gen. 1:26: נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם, “Let us make humankind.” The use of the plural verb form נַעֲשֶׂה here functions as the textual irritant that gives rise to the need for interpretation.⁹ With whom is God speaking in this passage? The midrash offers several possible resolutions, each one building on the previous interpretation in order to demonstrate what is at stake in the creation of humankind. My analysis begins with the third passage in the collection of commentaries on this phrase, the first to directly interrogate the surprising verb form נַעֲשֶׂה “let us make.” The midrash begins by asking, “With whom did He [God] consult?” Several *meshalim* (sing. *mashal*), or parables, are then offered. Drawing on characters and images from everyday life, each *mashal* seeks to illuminate the scriptural verse under consideration by way of illustration or analogy.¹⁰

⁹ As James Kugel has argued, midrash may best be understood “not as a genre of interpretation but as an interpretive stance.” The midrashic approach assumes a perfect and unified Biblical canon. Textual irritants—what Kugel refers to as “surface irregularities”—such as unusual spellings or surprising verb forms were not viewed as errors by the rabbinic *darshanim*. Rather, such irregularities were seen as an indication by the biblical text itself that this passage needed further interpretation. In our selection, the plural form of the verb נַעֲשֶׂה functions as just such an irregularity. See James Kugel, “Two Introductions to Midrash,” in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 144-45.

¹⁰ For more on how the *mashal* form works in midrashic literature see Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, 87-88 and David Stern, *Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 42-45. Although both scholars offer useful insights into how the *mashal* form functions, Stern includes both *aggadic* and Amoraic texts in his analysis, while Boyarin’s study is confined to the *Mekhilta of Rabbi*

In our passage, the first *mashal* is offered by R. Yehoshua in the name of R. Levi. He suggests that when it came time to create humanity, God consulted with “the work of heaven and earth. A *mashal*: The matter is similar to a king who had court advocates and he did not do a thing without consulting them.” R. Shmuel b. Nachman then offers a similar opinion, but suggests that rather than consulting only with the heavens and the earth, God consulted with “the work of each and every day [of creation],” which he likens to a “personal advisor.” Despite these small differences, the two readings are quite similar in both structure and message. Both interpret the verb נעשה as indicating that God sought advice from someone outside of himself, thereby suggesting that God did not act wholly independently when creating humankind.

The following two *meshalim* offer a remarkably different take on the matter: God took counsel with his own heart. Unlike in the interpretations above, it should be noted that in these two opinions, the plural verb form is not taken to indicate that God actually conferred with someone beyond himself. God does not need, or simply does not ask for, external input. This tension over whether God took the advice of others into account is not resolved within this first passage, but, as shall be seen later on, it resurfaces and continues to shape the interpretive thrust of the subsequent midrash.

The interpretation that God consulted with his heart does not only raise tensions about the degree of independence with which God acted during the creation of humanity. It also introduces a new theme: divine disappointment.

R. Ammi said, “He consulted with his heart. A *mashal*: the matter is similar to a king who built a palace with the help of an architect. He saw the palace and it did not please him. With whom should he be angry? Surely the architect! This is the meaning of ‘He was grieved toward his heart’ (Gen. 6:6).”

R. Ammi here brings in a verse from the story of Noah to help resolve the question of with whom God is speaking in Genesis 1:26. Genesis 6:5 describes how widespread the wickedness of humankind had become, until the point that, in Genesis 6:6, God comes to regret having created humanity at all. In its original context in the story of Noah, the phrase quoted in our midrash, which in Hebrew reads וַיִּתְעַצֵּב אֱלֹהִים לְבָבוֹ, is usually translated “He [God] was grieved to his heart,” i.e. God was deeply upset over what had become of his creation. Within the context of our midrash, however, R. Ammi has atomized this phrase; taking it out of its original narrative context, he both resituates and reinterprets it within the context of his *mashal*.¹¹

Ishmael, a Tannaitic text composed primarily of *halakhic* midrash. Thus, I find Stern’s analysis of the *mashal* more directly applicable to the texts under consideration here.

¹¹ For a discussion of the process of atomization, see David Stern, “Midrash and Indeterminacy,” *Critical Inquiry* 15 (1998): 138, 150; see also James Kugel, *In*

By incorporating Genesis 6:6 as an intertext to Genesis 1:26, a new understanding of the moment of creation is generated.¹² When it comes time to create the first human, God consults with himself, examining his own desires and emotions and deciding whether or not this creation should take place. When this choice results in the rampant wickedness of humankind seen in Genesis 6, God regrets his choice to create humankind but has no one to blame for the consequences except his own heart. As a result, the phrase לְבוֹ אֵל יִתְעַצְבוֹ (אל) is here read to mean that God was grieved *against* (אל) his heart for encouraging him to create humanity. Although Genesis 6:6 has here been removed from its original narrative context and resituated in light of the *mashal*, it is important to note that the context of the Noah story still clings to this verse, impacting R. Ammi's interpretation.¹³ In the story of the Flood, it is the wickedness of humankind that causes God to regret his creation of humanity. Although such regret has not yet been introduced in Gen. 1:26, since humankind has not even been created yet, the *mashal* both anticipates and incorporates this source of frustration and disappointment.

This sense of divine displeasure and disappointment is heightened in the final *mashal* in this passage, offered by R. Assi.

Said R. Assi, "A *mashal*: the matter is similar to a king who did business through a middleman and suffered a loss. With whom should he be angry? Surely with the middleman! This is the meaning of 'He was grieved against his heart' (Gen. 6:6)."

Structurally, R. Assi's *mashal* does not differ significantly from that of R. Ammi. In both cases, God is represented by a king who engages in some type of venture for which he enlists the help of a specialist. In both cases, the project goes poorly, and the king becomes angry with his assistant. Despite these similarities, there is a significant new element introduced in R. Assi's interpretation. In R. Ammi's *mashal*, the king is displeased with the palace, but the consequences of that displeasure are not made explicit. Is the palace simply unappealing to the king, or is there a fundamental design flaw that renders it unusable? In R. Assi's interpretation, not only are the consequences clearer, but the stakes are also higher. As a result of engaging in this business

Potiphar's House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

¹² In the context of these midrash, I use the term intertext to designate a verse from outside of the immediate context of the verse under discussion that is brought into the midrashic narrative, in this case Genesis 6:6. Unlike a proof-text, which merely buttresses an opinion, the overlaps and tensions between the primary text under consideration (here Genesis 1:26) and the intertext both generate and shape the midrashic interpretation itself. For more on the use of this term, see Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, especially pp. 1-21.

¹³ Cf. James Kugel, *In Potiphar's House*.

venture, the king himself suffers a personal financial loss. By implication, then, the outcome of creating humanity is not only displeasing to God, but actually causes direct harm to God! Here we can again see how the use of Gen. 6:6 as the intertext to Gen. 1:26 has come to shape R. Assi's interpretation. Why would the creation of humanity ultimately be seen as causing God to suffer from a personal loss? The story of the Flood and humankind's irredeemable and widespread wickedness provides us with a partial answer. By drawing an analogy to a business transaction, however, R. Assi's *mashal* also suggests that, had things turned out differently, God stood to gain something from this creation.

David Stern has suggested that the *mashal* form often plays a pedagogic function, both transmitting rabbinic ideology and drawing the audience into the hermeneutic process.¹⁴ Many *meshalim*, including those in our passage, contain gaps between the *mashal* itself and its application to the biblical verse being interpreted (or *nimshal*). For example, in both R. Ammi and R. Assi's *mashal*, the king consults with an outside figure, but this outside figure is then interpreted to be God's heart. Why would the midrash suggest that God's heart was somehow separate from God's self? Stern argues that such slippages are an integral and intentional part of the *mashal* form; it is through the reader's process of attempting to bridge these gaps and figure out the *mashal*'s application that meaning is generated.¹⁵

I propose that in the two narratives just considered, the suggestion that God's heart is somehow independent from the rest of God's self is designed to set up the ethical and emotional tensions that we will see God wrestling with in the following section. Furthermore, these gaps are designed to draw the reader into the interpretive process, as he struggles to map the characters presented in the *mashal* onto the biblical text. This process of mapping is designed, in my view, to set the reader up to not only identify the different biblical characters in the *mashal*, but also to begin identifying himself with the characters introduced by the midrash. By encouraging him to cast himself as a character within the midrashic narrative, the reader ends up placing himself and his own behavior in direct relationship to that of his Creator. As a result, he is pushed to cultivate within himself a sense of responsibility towards God.¹⁶ If the *mashal* is effective, this feeling of responsibility towards God will outlast the immediate context of the midrashic narrative itself. In concert with other rabbinic, and especially midrashic, literature, it will encourage the reader to center his behavior around this sense of accountability

¹⁴ Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 42-44.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁶ I use the terminology of reader here, despite the fact that these texts were originally transmitted orally, because my focus here includes an examination of these passages in *Bereshit Rabba* as they were ultimately redacted and transmitted in their present literary form.

towards God. Or, to paraphrase R. Yehudah haNasi's language, the *mashal* is designed to encourage the reader to place the words of the midrash itself onto his heart, so that through them the reader will come recognize his responsibility towards "the One who Spoke and the world was created." He will thereby make his relationship with God the center of his attention, and as a result, he will "cleave to His [God's] ways."¹⁷

A Reckless Love for the Righteous¹⁸

The themes introduced in R. Ammi and R. Assi's *meshalim* are picked up and intensified in the next section in *Bereshit Rabba*. This second section begins with the assumption that humankind will inevitably be wicked, and attempts to address why, given this foreseeable outcome, God wanted to create humanity anyway. Drawing on the theme hinted at in R. Assi's *mashal*, it suggests that while God suffers as a result of human wickedness, God also derives significant personal benefit or enjoyment from human righteousness. The selection begins by momentarily abandoning the problematic verb form *הַעֲשֶׂה*, and moving directly to an interrogation of the act of creating humanity itself.

R. Berechya said, "At the time when the Holy One, Blessed Be He, came to create the first human, He saw righteous ones and wicked ones coming out from him." He said, "If I create him, wicked ones will come out from him. But if I do not create him, how are the righteous ones to come out from him?" What did the Holy One, Blessed Be He, do? He removed the ways of the wicked from before his face, He aligned himself with the attribute of mercy, and He created him, as it is written "For the LORD knows the way of the righteous but the way of the wicked will be destroyed (Ps. 1:6)." He destroyed

¹⁷ The dynamics between text and reader here differ somewhat from those in rabbinic narratives focused on highly idealized or exemplary figures. Narratives focused on exemplars, such as hagiographic literature or stories of the sages, tend to encourage emulation of a specific character within the story, thereby delineating a clearer range of desired behaviors than can be seen in our midrash here. However, it is worth noting that there is a large collection of rabbinic narratives that seem designed to encourage the reader to directly examine his own behavior either by identifying with a specific character or by comparing his own behavior to such a character. A comparison of the dynamics between text and reader seen here and those seen in this related genre of literature about exemplars may be illuminating. The interested reader should see Jonathan Schofer, *The Making of a Sage: A Study in Rabbinic Ethics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), and Tzvi Novick, *What is Good and What God Demands* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 193-219.

¹⁸ I am indebted to my colleague, Andrew Guffey, for brilliantly coining the phrase "God's reckless love for the righteous" to describe the dynamics in this passage, and for his insights into this midrash as a whole.

it [the way of the wicked] from before Him, joined himself with the attribute of mercy, and He created him [the first human].

In this midrash, in the very moment of creating humankind, God foresees that both wicked ones (רשעים) and righteous ones (צדיקים) will result from that creation.¹⁹ Bringing wickedness into the world is clearly not something that God desires. And yet, despite this inevitable outcome, God chooses to create humanity anyway. Although the outcome is a foregone conclusion, since any reader of this midrash knows that humanity is eventually created, the surprising nature of God's decision should not be underemphasized. In the early rabbinic community, the question of whether or not God made the right choice in creating humanity remained a topic of debate.²⁰ Furthermore, the echoes of R. Ammi and R. Assi's comments are still present within this passage; the reader knows that God ultimately comes to regret his decision. Perhaps, the midrash suggests, it truly would have been best if God had never created humankind.

R. Berechya's opinion further highlights the astonishing nature of God's decision to create humanity in two separate ways. First, his interpretative reading of Psalm 1:6 implies that God engages in what appears to be divine self-deception. In the original context of the psalm, this verse suggests that God will watch over the righteous and protect their ways, while the wicked will be physically destroyed. In the context of the midrash, however, this verse takes on a different meaning. God does not physically destroy the wicked; rather, he puts their ways out of his mind and focuses his attention exclusively on the righteous. And yet, even this self-deception is insufficient. Despite the fact that God attempts to block from his sight the fact that wicked people will come into the world as a result of creating humanity, God still needs to join himself to the quality of mercy (מדת רחמים) in order to convince himself to create humankind. God not only engages in self-deception, he

¹⁹ The Hebrew here is somewhat vague; רשעים and צדיקים could ostensibly refer to actions, in which case, the midrash would be suggesting that God knew that humanity would do both righteous and wicked deeds. Given the use of the verb יצא in connection to the first human and the narrative thrust of the passage as a whole, however, I am inclined to read these as references to two different types of people. Thus, the midrash would be indicating that when God created the first person, he foresaw that his descendants would include both wicked and righteous individuals.

²⁰ Cf. *Erubin* 13b. In this Talmudic debate, the house of Shammai argues that it would have been better (גוה) had humankind not been created, while the house of Hillel says it is better that they were created. The debate is resolved with the statement that it would have been better had humanity not been created, but since it was, each man should inspect his deeds closely. Such a view has resonances not only with the Talmudic emphasis we have already seen on the importance of proper action, but also with the suggestion of our midrash from *Bereshit Rabba* that one should repay God's choice to create humankind, despite the costs, by striving to be a righteous person.

needs to gather reinforcements in order to go through with his decision! Both of these actions suggest a divine discomfort with the act of creating humanity, underscoring the ethical complications of this act.

And yet, it is this very discomfort that highlights so starkly for the reader the fact that against all odds, and perhaps against his own best judgment, God chooses to create humanity. Indeed, God here displays what might be accurately described as a *reckless love for the righteous*. God not only has an incredible desire to create humankind in general but, more specifically, God possesses a seemingly uncontrollable longing to create righteous people, even when the costs of doing so are extremely high. Bringing out the subtext of R. Berechya's interpretation, the issue facing God can be seen starkly. "If I create him, wicked ones will come out from him [and bring evil into the world]. But if I do not create him, how are the righteous [whom I desire and love above all else] to come out from him?" For God, the benefits of the righteous' existence outweigh the cost of permitting the wicked to enter the world.

I will return to the narrative and ethical import of God's display of love for the righteous in this passage. Before doing so, however, it must be noted that God's willingness to allow evil to enter into the world poses serious ethical challenges. Rather than attempting to resolve these problems, the midrash goes on to intensify them.

R. Hanina did not say thus, but [said] rather, "When He [God] came to create the first human, He consulted with the ministering angels and said to them, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness (Gen 1:26).'" They said to Him, "This human, what is his character?" He said to them, "Righteous ones grow from him," as it is written 'For the LORD knows the way of the righteous (Ps. 1:6).' For the LORD notified the ministering angels [of the righteous], 'but the way of the wicked will be destroyed (Ps. 1:6).' He destroyed it from them, [meaning] He revealed to them [only] that the righteous would spring from him [because otherwise] the attribute of justice would not allow him to create humanity.

Although the overall message is similar, R. Hanina's interpretation differs from that of R. Berechya in several important ways. First, he incorporates more explicitly the language of the primary verse on which the midrash is commenting, Genesis 1:26. Second, like R. Yehoshua and R. Shmuel b. Nachman in the preceding passage, R. Hanina assumes that the plural verb form *נעשה* means that God is actually consulting with external entities—in this case the angelic court—rather than wrestling with himself, as R. Ammi, R. Assi and R. Berechya all suggested. It should be noted, however, that R. Hanina's midrash also begins to collapse the distinction between these two positions. In his interpretation, God consults with the angels but withholds key information, thereby rendering their input on his decision insignificant. Furthermore, R. Hanina states that it is the *attribute* of justice (*מדת הדין*),

which is usually understood to be part of the divine being, who would have interfered with God's creation of humankind, rather than the *angel* of justice. I will return to the significance of this distinction shortly. For the moment, however, it is useful to note that even if R. Hanina ultimately reduces the significance of this consultation, his interpretation that the verb נעשה indicates that God spoke with entities outside of himself still plays an important narrative function; it externalizes the quandary that God faces when creating humanity, allowing the reader to see God's decision-making process more fully. Furthermore, God's self-deception is changed to an overt deception of the angelic court, thereby exposing the rationale behind his ruse: God lies, to the angels and perhaps also to himself, because otherwise the attribute of justice would not allow for the creation of humanity.

In rabbinic literature, the attribute of justice (מדת הדין) and the attribute of compassion (מדת רחמים) are often viewed as opposing or balancing forces.²¹ The attribute of compassion tempers the call for absolute justice, softening God's harsh indictment of human behavior. Thus, it is not surprising that R. Berechya and R. Hanina would emphasize these counterparts to God's judgment. It is interesting, however, which attribute each sage emphasizes. In R. Berechya's version, God's reckless love of the righteous instills in him an overwhelming desire to create humankind, even at the cost of bringing evil into the world. Here, it is the quality of compassion that enables him to make this problematic yet loving choice. In R. Hanina's interpretation, the emphasis remains on the importance and desirability of righteous people, but the indictment of God's decision to create them at such high cost is harsher. It is the shockingly apparent *injustice* of God's decision, rather than God's compassion and love, which are emphasized. In both versions, however, the creation of humankind involves a risk, a weighing of the value of righteous people against the pain wrought by the wicked that ultimately tips in humanity's favor. Although they may differ in tone, in both versions there is also a sense of surprise at how strongly God desires to be in relationship to righteous, even at significant cost to himself.

Divine Independence and Human Responsibility

When read as a collective unit, the two passages examined above from *Bereshit Rabba* put forward a variety of perspectives on the creation of humankind, each of which builds upon and is in tension with the viewpoints that precede it and come after it. Several major questions are introduced, including two central problems with which the rabbinic reader must wrestle.

²¹ For further examples of how these attributes are viewed in rabbinic literature, especially within the context of creation, see *Pesikta Rabbati* 40, *Genesis Rabbah* 12:5 and 21:7.

First, at the moment of creating humankind, did God act independently or in collaboration with others? What does God's independence or lack thereof indicate about God's ultimate responsibility for the wickedness wrought by humanity? Second, did God make the right choice in creating humanity, and what is at stake for the rabbinic reader in asking and in attempting to answer that question? What do these interpretations indicate about what God wants from the rabbinic sage or disciple?

These two sets of questions are deeply interrelated. The issue of God's independent action in creating humanity is ultimately a question of who is responsible for the wickedness that humans have brought into the world. Although the midrashic selections considered here include opinions that suggest God did not act completely independently in creating humankind, they display an overall emphasis on the independence of divine action. Interpretations claiming that God consulted with external entities may be offered, but they are quickly discarded for much of the subsequent narrative. Even R. Hanina, who initially seems to follow R. Yehoshua and R. Shmuel when he suggests that God consulted with the angelic court, ultimately portrays any angelic involvement in God's decision to create humankind as inconsequential. Although the midrash suggests that the quality of justice would have been able to prevent God from creating humanity if the true consequences of that creation had been revealed, God's decision to withhold key information prevents such an action. Furthermore, as noted above, R. Hanina refers not to the angel of justice, but to *middat ha-din*, the divine attribute of justice. Thus, it is not clear that the angels themselves could have prevented God's decision to create humanity.²² Rather, his choice to lie to them about the nature of humankind (albeit by omission) is a repetition of the tendency seen in R. Berechya's version of the narrative. In lying to the angels, God also deceives himself, hiding the real consequences of creating humanity from his own desire to maintain absolute justice.

When read together as a unified narrative, the different midrashic interpretations considered here thus seem to conclude that the decision to create humanity was God's, and God's alone. And yet, despite this emphasis on the independence of this divine action, the midrash does not seem to hold God culpable for the negative consequences of his choice to create

²² Angelic characters, sometimes referred to in relation to a specific attribute such as justice or mercy and sometimes referred to collectively as "the ministering angels," are a common trope in midrashic literature. Louis Jacobs has suggested that rabbinic literature often voices moral concerns or objections regarding God's conduct by placing them in the mouths of angels. See Louis Jacobs, "Angels," in *The Jewish Religion: A Companion*, ed. Louis Jacobs, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 25-26.

humanity.²³ There are moments where the rabbinic response to God's decision to create humanity appears tinged by criticism and even, in the case of R. Hanina, by a sense of moral outrage, but the midrash does not ultimately pursue this perspective. Rather, I argue that by encouraging the audience to question how and why God made this choice, the midrash attempts to cultivate in its readers a radical sense of indebtedness and personal responsibility towards God.

Given that the audience for these texts was likely to be comprised of rabbinic disciples, it seems reasonable to assume that they would self-identify with the righteous in these narratives.²⁴ After all, their lives were explicitly devoted to the study and fulfillment of divine teaching and rabbinic law. Surely such readers would have wanted to understand themselves as righteous men. Furthermore, it is common for readers to cast themselves as the hero or protagonist of a narrative and quite rare for them to self-identify with the villain. And yet, even if this were the case, the emphasis in these passages on the negative consequence of creating humankind would still be likely to evoke a degree of anxiety among the audience. When read as a collective literary unit, these midrash make three elements unquestionably clear: 1) God is wholly good and does not want there to be wickedness in the world; 2) wickedness is brought into the world through human agents; and 3) this wickedness grieves God and causes him suffering. Faced with this stark depiction of the relationship between God and humanity, the reader is forced to entertain the disquieting possibility that if he is not extremely careful, he could end up contributing to the wickedness that causes God such pain. Yet the opposite is also true. Faced with this same depiction, the reader is also confronted by God's surprising yet abiding love and desire for righteous people. He may fear falling into error, but he is also presented with the

²³ It is interesting that the rabbis implicitly raise, but do not pursue, the possibility of divine culpability for the existence of evil in the world within the context of this midrash. Rabbinic engagement with the issue of theodicy is varied. The discussion of the figure of Job in *Baba Bathra* 14b-16a, for example, illustrates the rabbinic willingness to engage with the reality of suffering and apparent injustice in the world, while also displaying a sense of ambivalence and discomfort about the degree to which one can suggest that God is responsible for that reality. For an excellent survey of this theme within rabbinic literature, see David Kraemer, *Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

²⁴ Rachel Anisfeld has argued that the audience for these midrash extended beyond the rabbinic academy and disciple circles, and that they may in fact have been designed to attract non-rabbinic Jews to the rabbinic way of life. Whether or not one agrees with her analysis, it seems reasonable to assume that rabbinic students comprised at least part of the intended audience for these texts. It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider the impact of these texts on a broader readership (Anisfeld, *Sustain Me with Raisin-Cakes*).

possibility to join (or maintain his position among) the ranks of the *tzaddikim*, that elect group whose very existence brings God joy and satisfaction.

By entering into the narrative reality of the midrash, the reader thus casts himself into a direct relationship with his Creator. This relationship, while deeply imbalanced, also offers clear guidelines for how one should behave within it. If one wishes to repay the incredible investment that God made in creating humanity, then one must strive to be among the righteous. It is *only* through righteous behavior that the individual can hope to repay God and to bring God pleasure and delight in his creation.

Unpacking the Rhetoric of Righteousness

Having examined the contours of the relationship that the midrash in *Bereshit Rabba* suggests exists between the rabbinic disciple and his Creator, we can now consider the implications for R. Yehudah haNasi's interpretation of the commandment to love God. To love God, in the context of these midrash, would mean to acknowledge the radical debt that each person owes to God for deciding to take the chance on creating humanity in the first place. Thus, if we read R. Yehudah's comments in the *Sifre to Deuteronomy* through the lens of these passages from *Bereshit Rabba*, genuine study and contemplation of the commandment to love God should lead one to cultivate a posture of awe and gratitude towards God. Such a posture is not a static emotional state, however. By encouraging the reader to situate himself in this relationship with God, the midrash clearly intends to provide a grounding and motivation for engaging in righteous behavior. This striving to become righteous in *Bereshit Rabba* parallels R. Yehudah's statement that by recognizing "the One who spoke and the world was created" the rabbinic Jew will come to "cleave to [God's] ways."

It remains to be elucidated, however, what exactly such righteous behavior consists of. Initially it might seem that the midrashic perspective on the commandment to love God would result in remarkably similar behaviors to those outlined in the Talmud since, in the rabbinic worldview, anyone identified as a righteous person would surely observe the religious law. Within the Talmud itself, however, we can observe a tension between descriptions of idealized or righteous behavior, as portrayed in the *aggadic* narratives collected there about the lives of the rabbis themselves, and the legal obligations discussed within its famous *halakhic* debates. The *halakhic* concept of *לפנים משורת הדין*, going beyond the letter of the law, clearly displays that the authors and redactors of the Talmud understood that there was an ideal realm of behavior, what I here refer to as righteous behavior, which was

not necessarily met by normative *halakhic* practice.²⁵ In fact, this tension between normative and idealized behavior plays out within Talmudic discussions of the commandment to love God itself. Although the Talmud is primarily concerned with defining the legal obligations entailed by this commandment, the most famous citation of this verse is doubtless found within its description of the martyrdom of R. Akiva. This account illustrates R. Akiva's great desire to completely fulfill every possible element of the command to love God, so that even as he is being tortured to death, he recites the *Shema*. His disciples ask him how he can recite the prayer at such a time and R. Akiva replies, "All my life I was worried about the verse, 'with all your soul' (Deut. 6:5)—even if He takes away your soul. I said to myself, 'will I ever be able to fulfill this command'? And now that I am finally able to fulfill it, should I not do so?"²⁶ Thus, despite the fact the Talmud's primary concern is to define the extent of one's legal obligations, that emphasis does not exclude striving to emulate figures like R. Akiva who surpass these minimum requirements and become paradigms of righteousness within Jewish tradition. Even though the Talmudic approach operates primarily within a legalistic framework, this does not preclude emphasizing ideal or virtuous behavior that goes beyond the letter of the law.

And yet, although the Talmud also acknowledges and elevates a category of righteous behavior above straightforward adherence to the law, it differs in one important aspect from the midrashic perspective voiced both by R. Yehudah in the *Sifre to Deuteronomy* and in the various comments considered from *Bereshit Rabba*. From the Talmudic perspective, love of God is defined as action. To love God is equated with *halakhic* observance. Even within the account of R. Akiva's death described above, which is the closest Talmudic parallel to the approach taken within the midrash, R. Akiva states that

²⁵ For examples of this concept referenced in the Talmud, see *Baba Metzia* 24b, 30b, and 83a, and *Baba Kamma* 99b. This tension is expressed through several different Talmudic concepts, and has been discussed in both classical and contemporary Jewish scholarship. See, for example, Nachmanides' comments on "קדושים תהי" in Lev. 19:2, "Does Judaism Recognize an Ethic Independent of Halakhah?" in Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, *Leaves of Faith: The World of Jewish Learning* (Jersey City: KTAV Publishing House, 2004), 33-56 and Tzvi Novick, *What is Good and What God Demands*. Lichtenstein has argued that "*halakhah* itself mandates that we go beyond its legal corpus" because the Jew is obligated to try to imitate God to the best of his ability and to do "the right and the good" (ibid, 42). By way of contrast, Novick argues that there are two competing rhetorics in present in tannaitic literature, one which focuses on duty (legally required behavior) and one which focuses on virtue (ideal or righteous behavior). I am inclined to agree with Novick, and view discussions of *lifnim meshurat ha-din* and other parallel concepts (such as *qedoshim tihiyu*, above) as signs of a superegal or supererogatory ethic present in rabbinic literature that is distinct from *halakhic* ethics.

²⁶ *Berakhot* 61b.

allowing himself to be killed rather than desecrating the divine name (a legal obligation instituted by the rabbis) is, *by definition*, what the biblical verse means when it commands you to love God “with all your soul.” The midrash considered here suggest otherwise. To love God is, first and foremost, to be in relationship with God, and specifically to be in a relationship that acknowledges God as Creator. All proper and righteous human action, be it daily *halakhic* observance or acts of great virtue or extreme piety, are a *consequence* of that relationship. It is the relationship with God that grounds human action and motivates the individual to remain on the right path.

Reconciling the Talmudic and Midrashic Approaches

Although the perspectives and emphases of the Talmud and the midrashic literature may differ, the understandings that they advance of what it means to love God and how one does so can still be viewed as complementary. Both strive to reinforce normative human behavior—and even righteous or ideal human behavior—as it was understood in the rabbinic world. In addition, we must remember that neither the Talmud nor the midrash speak univocally. Although they may display certain tendencies in their understandings of the commandment to love God, both offer a variety of perspectives. Furthermore, the rabbinic sages quoted in the Talmud are often also the authors of the midrashic literature. Thus, the same community gave voice to, and was able to simultaneously hold in tension, these different approaches to loving God.

If the rabbinic sages were able to uphold a legalistic approach to this commandment alongside an approach that emphasized emotional connection and pushed for superlative behavior, and if, as I have argued here, these two approaches can be understood as complementary to one another, then one important question remains. Why do we see such a strong emphasis on the legal understanding in the Talmud, and such a different emphasis in the midrash? Why divide these approaches into two different bodies of literature, if they were ultimately both able to be maintained in the lived experiences of rabbinic individuals?

On some level, the answer to such questions is simple. The Talmud is primarily a legal document; even if it does not always provide clear *halakhic* rulings, its approach and outlook is focused on understanding the *halakhah* in a wide variety of cases. In the Talmudic texts cited above, the commandment to love God is introduced primarily, though not exclusively, within the context of trying to discern what one’s legal obligations are in a series of possible cases.²⁷ The midrashic enterprise, on the other hand, is quite

²⁷ A quick survey of any *sugya* in the Talmud will demonstrate that, insofar as the Talmud can be understood as a compendium of law, it is an example of casuistic law. As a result, David Weiss Halivni has argued that the Talmud, as an interpretive legal

different. It seeks primarily to interpret the biblical verse in which this commandment is given.²⁸ As a result, there is space within the midrash to investigate the possible nuances of the language of the commandment to love God, and to place that verse in relationship to other verses in the Bible which might help to illuminate its meaning, without needing to make immediate reference to the practical implications of such a commandment.

Although these differences in focus, purpose and interpretive method may certainly account for the different emphases in the Talmudic and midrashic responses to the commandment to love God, we should not disregard the effect of having these two approaches contained within two different bodies of literature. In my view, the midrashic passages considered here cultivate in their readers a certain emotional, ethical and religious posture towards God. They encourage the rabbinic reader to strive constantly to achieve an ever-greater level of righteousness, but do not elucidate what righteous behavior looks like or how one is to attain it. The Talmud, on the other hand, explains the specific religious obligations of the rabbinic individual and even offers

enterprise, actually shares more in common with *halakhic* midrash than it does with the form and style of the Mishnah on which it comments. He attributes this commonality to a Jewish “predilection for justified law,” noting that the ways in which Gemara analyzes, interprets and expands upon the *halakhot* of the Mishnah and other authoritative texts in the rabbinic canon (including the *Tanakh* and various *baraitot*). This approach in many ways mirrors the analysis and exegesis of biblical verses found in *halakhic* midrash. Cf. David Weiss Halivni, *Midrash, Mishnah and Gemara: The Jewish Predilection for Justified Law* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).

²⁸ This classification applies primarily to *aggadic* midrash, including the passages from *Bereshit Rabba* considered here. *Halakhic* midrash is a more complex case; like *aggadic* midrash, it is typically motivated by identifiable exegetical concerns, but its sphere of concern also includes the specific *halakhic* implications of the verse. Thus, as Halivni has noted, there may be a greater affinity between the Talmud and the enterprise of *midrash halakhah* (Ibid., above). It should also be noted that the degree to which exegetical motivations give rise to midrashic interpretation is the subject of much debate. Some scholars, as I have suggested here, are inclined to read the midrash as motivated by textual problems and pressures (cf. James Kugel, *In Potiphar's House*). Others are more likely to cite a wide variety of socio-historical factors that also motivate midrashic interpretation. Cf. Steven D. Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary: Torah and Its Interpretation in the Midrash Sifre to Deuteronomy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991). Such disagreements may be attributed at least partially to the different midrashic works on which each scholar focuses; for example, scholars have noted and attributed significant differences between midrashic compilations to the different interpretive principles of the schools of R. Ishmael and R. Akiba (cf. Novick, *What is Good and What God Demands*), to the different ways in which midrash was utilized in the Tannaitic and Amoraic periods (cf. Anisfeld, *Sustain Me with Raisin-Cakes*) and to the different exegetical motivations driving *halakhic* and *aggadic* midrash (cf. Stern, *Midrash and Theory*).

specific illustrations of instances in which the sages were able to surpass those obligations and attain a higher level of righteous behavior. Thus, these two bodies of literature play off of one another; the midrash may encourage the reader to go beyond the letter of the law, but it needs that law to exist and be clearly elucidated for such a position to be intelligible. Furthermore, while it may at times push the reader to strive for higher ideals of behavior, the midrash also motivates adherence to the *halakhah* by grounding it within the personal relationship between the human individual and God.

Within these two bodies of rabbinic literature, the commandment to love God is concretized and rendered accessible through two very different vocabularies. It is defined in the language of specific actions and legal obligations in the Talmud, but it is also illustrated and pushed beyond straightforward legal categories through the evocative and emotional language of the midrash. The tension between these textual approaches to the commandment to love God is ultimately complementary and productive. They help the rabbinic disciple, who would have been versed in both bodies of literature, to gain a fuller understanding of what it means to love God, and they open up a variety of avenues for striving to fulfill that important, yet challenging, commandment as fully as possible.

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