

What Can The Torah Do For You If Not For Israel?:  
A Cultural and Social Psychological Analysis of the  
Torah, the Book of Ezra, and the Book of Nehemiah

by

Tara Ann Kahn

Class of 2010

A thesis submitted to the  
faculty of Wesleyan University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Bachelor of Arts  
with Departmental Honors in Psychology

## **Acknowledgements**

Professor Steele

For all his support, encouragement and continuing faith that I would in fact eventually finish my thesis. You have taught me more than you could ever know.

Professor Zwelling

For serving as a shining example of someone who followed his passions

Family

For believing in me in my most fragile moments and continuing to push me to follow my dreams no matter the obstacles.

Friends

For all the late night talks, stress-relieving cuddling, and unfaltering knowledge that I could accomplish my goals.

**“God for all intents and purposes is an equal sign, and at least up until now, something humanity has always been able to believe in is that the universe adds up” – David Conte**

## Table Of Contents

Introduction.....	4
Chapter One: Genetics and Genealogies.....	7
Chapter Two: Counting.....	17
Chapter Three: Creation of Moral Codes and Laws.....	27
Chapter Four: The Marking of Israel.....	37
Chapter Five: God is Both Omnipotent and Ignorant.....	44
Conclusion.....	50
Bibliography.....	54

## **Introduction**

While I make no claim of validity or disapproval of any religion, the Torah, like many other holy documents, is in fact both an imagined history created to formulate the social cohesion of Israel and a means of understanding the world those people inhabited: both central issues for social and cultural psychology. At religion's, and psychology's, very core is the human need to make sense of the world around them. How did the world begin? Where did we come from? Where are we going? Religion is an answer to these questions. The Torah settles the pre-modern-scientific minds of the people of Israel and gives answers to all of these fundamental and, indeed, life-stabilizing questions. The Torah, at least as the whole canonized document we now have, provides security through both a proclaimed order of the cosmos and a social order for the people of Israel to follow. Through the Torah's ability to serve as a primary source of knowledge and understanding of the world, it also provides information on the social cohesion of the group and the need for that group to remain connected and genetically isolated in order to maintain its identity (Mullen 12,15).

Though the Torah is on many levels an instruction manual for Israel, the multitude of stories described in the five books of Moses also serve to demonstrate the relationship of the people of Israel with its God. Throughout the stories, God is omnipotent except in his utter and ultimate trust in the Israelites to follow all of his commands. The Israelites, while usually believers in the entity of God, very often stray from his commandments in ignorant belief that they know better than the all-knowing. Within the text there is

very much a parent-child relationship between the people of Israel and God. God, though not faultless, is the Freudian overpowering father aiming at controlling the livelihood of all of his children of Israel. The Israelites, however, quite often rejects this relationship by rebelling against their father figure, even after time and time again they are punished for doing so. Though modern Judaism of all sorts falls out of the purview of this paper, it is easy to see how such a complicated relationship with the deity would lead to such varying interpretations of the text.

The Torah goes to great lengths to establish and create a social system that will enable the people of Israel to continue and prosper for millennia to come. In doing so, the Torah constructs a strict social system that gives every person of every gender, age, and familial lineage a specific role in the community. This formulation both provides a concrete system by which to live by, but also restricts all the people of Israel to these confined roles.

Part of the confusion created by the text is to be blamed on the mostly unknown but widely theorized canonization process of the Torah (Mullen 78-79). For thousands of years the question of how, where, and why the Torah was written and finalized in the way that it has been, has created much argument and varying opinions. It is only within the past few hundred years that biblical academics even were legally allowed to question whether the Torah was written at one time, in one place. Most modern academic views of the canonization process now agree that the Torah must have been written in multiple parts with redactors combining the various sections. While again, the question of which canonization theory is most plausible is far outside the

goal of this paper, it is important to note that many of the inconsistencies, repetitions, and illogical sections may be the doing of redactors attempting to combine various sources into one text. For the purposes of this paper, we cannot spend too much time on how and why the text was written the way that it was, but rather on why such a text has lasted for millennia and what exactly the goals of its authors were.

Why has the Torah remained relevant for so long? Why, unlike many of the other small peoples of the time, did the Israelites prosper and survive until today? What about the Torah allowed for the continuation and preservation of the people of Israel until today? These are the questions this paper aims to answer; how the psychology manifest in the Torah led to its incredibly long lifespan as not only a relevant, but also a continuing example of how an Israelite should conduct his or her life.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **Genetics and Genealogies**

Throughout the Torah, and indeed huge portions of the Book of Genesis, the issue of pure bloodlines and controlling who is allowed into the ethnic group of the Hebrews/Israel plays a vital and dominating role in the text. Many of the books of Moses contain long lists of genealogies proving that some man or woman is eligible to do great things by the fact that he or she can draw his or her lineage back to Abraham (Mullen 70, 117). The mere fact that the Torah authors go to such lengths to prove the genealogies of such people demonstrate the utmost importance of those histories to the authors. Following this need for purity of bloodlines, reading the stories of the four founding mothers is worthy of note since all four woman are barren, or to be most specific, needed God to “[open] her womb” (Gen. 29:30). Like the barrenness of the four founding mothers, the issue of the rights of the older son come into question time and time again, often ending with the younger son in power – a clear violation of God’s constructed social order. The Torah wrestles with all of these issues and more when depicting the utmost importance of the genetics and genealogies of the Hebrews/Israel.

#### *God Has One Chosen People*

One of the most significant and unique elements of the Israelite religion is that not only does it not condone proselytizing, but it also makes conversion very difficult. Unlike most of the religions of the world, the Israelite religion, in addition to most forms of modern Judaism, go to great



lengths to insulate the group and force away foreigners. The Israelite religion, based on the Torah, states that God chose one man, Abraham, to be the father of his chosen people and nation. Although other peoples in the area of Abraham and Abraham's descendants' wanderings are at times also protected, it is only the members of the Abrahamic bloodline, through Isaac, that are considered legitimate members of Israel (Mullen 68-69,92, 140).

In an attempt to emphasize this point further, God, in his choosing of Abraham and Sarah, actually gives them those names (Mullen 138). Originally Abram and Sarai, God commands the two to add a ה to the end of each of their names, in a sense making their names more similar to his, Yahweh, in Hebrew: יהוה (Gen, 17:4-5; 17:15). Even more importantly, the name Yahweh is the special name of God that no one is ever supposed to speak or write. Thus, God's sharing part of his name with Abraham and Sarah signifies their great importance to the story of the beginning of God's chosen people. Not only has God chosen these two people to be the founding mother and father of his chosen people, but also has given them special privilege in being closer to God himself. This connection between Abraham, Sarah and God is significant because it gives legitimacy to both Abraham and Sarah and strengthens God's promise to make of them a great people (Gen. 12:1-3; Gen. 13:14-15). The Abrahamic line will be strong and prosperous and as proof of this promise God will give the two founding parents part of his special, unspeakable and unwriteable name.

In another important turning point in the Hebrew/Israel narrative, Jacob is given the name Israel for he had "striven with God and with humans,

and [had] prevailed “ (Gen. 32:28). On his way to confront his brother, Esau, after stealing his birthright, Jacob is instead attacked by an unknown man. Jacob wrestles with the man all night and as the day breaks, the man tells him to stop. Jacob states that he will only consent if the man agrees to bless him, to which the man gives him the name Israel and then Jacob knows that he has seen God and survived (Gen. 32:6-30). This foundational moment in the Torah demonstrates the crossover from being Hebrews to Israelites. No longer are the people defined merely by their language but now by their direct relationship with God. From Jacob, all of Israel will grow. Israel will become great because of Jacob’s cunning with both man, specifically his brother, and God. Once again, Israel’s relationship with the divine is strengthened by both its fundamentally human qualities and its ability to face God and win, a complicated yet deeply mutual relationship.

#### *Proof of Legitimate Lineage and Miscegenation*

In many of the five books of Moses, the issue of proving legitimate lineage is focused on in the extreme. Many times a character in a story in the Torah must be proved to be of the pure Abrahamic bloodline in order to be justified as a legitimate person of note (Mullen 130). This pure Abrahamic bloodline does not only mean being a direct descendent of Abraham, but also not polluted by non-Hebrew or non-Israelite blood: by any of the peoples that God forbid his people to marry (Mullen 145).

The long lists of genealogies begins as early as the story of Noah where his righteousness and ability to build the ark is proven by verse upon

verse of documented lineage showing that Noah is indeed a descendent of Abraham (Gen. 5:1-32). To reinforce the legitimacy of the lineage, it is repeated again in Gen. 10:1-31. Without such proof that Noah is the descendent of Abraham, Noah would not be part of the primordial clan of the Hebrews and thus not eligible, under God's statutes, to be the builder of the ark. These demonstrations of ethnic entitlement are crucial components of the Torah because they provide background for the rest of the story to come (Mullen 68-69). Moses' Israel is fundamentally based on the foundation of the primordial Abrahamic line: this line proves that Israel come from a long line of privileged and blessed people that far exceeds just the generations in Egypt, but that of hundreds of years before. God has chosen the Hebrew, through Abraham, and he will continue to maintain his promises through to Israel.

Following the standard set by the rejected sexual union of Abraham and Hagar, the issue of miscegenation becomes important for all of the children of Abraham, all the men of Israel. Though this issue comes up many times before, the Book of Deuteronomy specifically discusses which people the Israelites are allowed to marry (Deut. 23:7-8) and which they are not (Deut. 23:3-4). These rules are again strengthened in the Book of Ezra and Nehemiah, which although not part of the five books of Moses are important books in the Old Testament. In Ezra, many of the priests and the Levites had taken foreign wives not condoned by God. God responds quite harshly demanding that all those who have transgressed must abandon their wives and children immediately (Ezra 10:18-44). Though this is one of the lesser

punishments that the God of the Torah prescribes, this incident demonstrates the importance of maintaining the unbroken Israelite bloodline. The Book of Nehemiah simply states: "We will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons" (Neh. 10:30). The laws against miscegenation are repeated multiple times in the Torah, making it stand out as a law to be followed.

### *The Founding Mothers' Barrenness*

As the founder of a people, Abraham knows that he is obligated to propagate that people through a clear and singular male heir. Abraham (then only Abram) eventually becomes desperate for a male heir to build his new people through because of his wife's, Sarah's, barrenness. Sarah (then Sarai), understands this fundamental need and gives her Egyptian handmaid to Abraham in order to make sure that a male heir is produced (Gen. 16:1-16). This union between Abraham and Hagar, the maid, results in the birth of Ishmael. Ishmael however is not a sufficient heir since he is the son of an Egyptian, a clearly excluded group from the pure ethnic line of the Hebrews. Thus, later on in Genesis, God agrees finally to open Sarah's womb and let her bear a son, Isaac, who will be the sole and rightful heir to the Abrahamic lineage.

Like the plight of Sarah, all three other primordial mothers are also barren until God takes it upon himself to bring them sons. Both Isaac and Jacob are instructed by their respective fathers to go back to the east, from where Abraham originally came, to find a wife that is of their people (Mullen

146). Both follow these instructions and find wives of appropriate birth to be brought into the house of Abraham. Rebekah, Isaac's wife, and Rachel, Jacob's second but most loved wife, are clearly described as barren, while Leah, Jacob's first wife, is not obviously barren, she must ask God to allow her to bare Jacob a son in order to win Jacob's favor. This literary repetition of finding a suitable wife only to determine that she is barren is significant in a holy text that focuses so strongly on the need for male inheritors. But this is only part of the story.

Both Sarah and Rebekah, when traveling, are asked by their husbands to pretend to be their sisters so that no harm would come to Abraham or Isaac (Mullen 131). Thus, on two occasions when encountering foreign kings, both men present their wives as their sisters (Gen. 20:2-18; Gen. 26:6-11). Both times again the foreign kings eventually learn of their deceit and scold the men for their lies. Both kings understand that if they had had sex with either Sarah or Rebekah great and horrible things would have befallen them and their people. The wives are then returned to their rightful husbands. But in a social group so focused on ethnic purity, why would these men risk the contamination of their wives? Although it appears in the text that neither woman had sex with another man, such a situation would be dangerous to the purity of the bloodline. Ethics and morality aside, both women were in some way protected from contamination by the mere fact that they were barren. Even if a foreign man had taken Sarah or Rebekah as a wife, she would have been unable to bear him any children, thus negating the prospect

of disrupting or even confusing the Hebrew bloodline. Thus, the fact that both women were barren actually protects the purity of the ethnic bloodline.

Though all four women are initially barren, or at least unable to produce a male heir, God eventually blesses all of them and brings Isaac to Sarah (Gen. 21:2), Esau and Jacob to Rebekah (Gen. 25:21), and a plethora of male children to Rachel (Gen. 30:22-24) and Leah (Gen 29:32)(Mullen 147). Thus through the line of Abraham, Jacob came to bear twelve sons who founded the twelve tribes of Israel. An important note, however, is that Leah is never actually called barren, she only pleads to God to send her a son so that Jacob will love her more. Leah, Rachel's older sister, was married to Jacob under false pretenses. Jacob, having worked for seven years to marry his love, Rachel, was tricked by Rachel's father into marrying Leah. Jacob was then forced to work another seven years to procure Rachel as his second wife (Gen. 29:16-30). Leah bore six male children and one daughter for Jacob and yet was still unloved. What does this say about the relationship of this primordial marriage? The love between a man and a woman is held more highly than the ability of the woman to produce an heir? This sentiment seems to go against the strong demand within the text for male heirs. Thus, this complicated love triangle proves the utter humanness of the text. Though this Holy Scripture must have passed through many hands of redactors, the humanity of the stories remains intact. Even the primordial fathers and mothers were in fact human and not gods: there is only one God and he is Yahweh.

### *Primordial Stories of Older and Younger Sons*

Similar to the perplexing story of the barren primordial mothers is the multiple stories of rivalry between older and younger sons competing for both acceptance from the father-figure of God and their human father. The Torah clearly states that the firstborn son of a man is by law allotted more inheritance than the younger regardless of any other factors (Deut. 21:15-17). This law, however, is not always followed in many of the stories of brothers in the Torah.

The first example of this paradigm is that of Adam and Eve's first two children, Cain and Abel (Mullen 147). This story is specifically interesting because it is surprisingly the older son who is jealous of the younger son. Though Cain is the older son and therefore was born with the birthright of being the preferred son, God loves Abel more because he is a shepherd and Cain is merely a farmer. Cain, jealous of God's preference for Abel, takes Abel into the fields and kills him, ironically staining his farming land with the blood of his brother. Cain is now cursed by God in that the ground will no longer yield food as easily as it had before (Gen. 4:1-16). This punishment is similar to that of his parents: Adam and Eve, who ate from the tree of knowledge and were thus cast out of the garden of Eden and Eve, specifically, was punished with the pain of childbirth (Gen. 3:1-24). Both of these anecdotes demonstrate to the reader of the Torah the reasoning for why life is so hard and not a paradise, like one might expect as a chosen people. These stories give a rationale for the reality of life as Israel knows it: their forefathers made fundamental mistakes which forever changed and shaped the way the

world works forevermore. Thus, the hardships that all people must undergo make sense; within just a few stories the Torah manages to explain why life is hard and must be hard.

The next story of two competing brothers is that of Isaac's sons, Jacob and Esau. Though twins, Esau came out of the womb first, thus claiming his spot as the older and privileged son. Even before they were born, "[t]he children struggled together within" Rebekah so much so that she asked God to explain to her why she was in such excessive pain (Gen. 25:22). God replied that "[t]wo nations are in your womb,/ and two peoples born of you shall be divided;/one shall be stronger than the other,/ the elder shall serve the younger" (Gen. 25:23). Yet again, as the two boys grew, Esau was a hunter and more loved by his father than Jacob who, preferred by his mother, "was a quiet man, living in tents" (Gen. 25:27). Jacob, with the help of his mother, conned both his brother and his father into giving him the birthright (Gen. 25:29-34; Gen. 27:1-25). Here is a quintessential example of how humans complicate the social order that God prescribes in the Torah. Although God foresaw these events and warned Rebekah of them, he allowed them to happen for non-specified reasons. In this story, the humans, though breaking God's social order, are actually following God's master plan. Two things are learned from this story. Firstly, God indeed has a master plan that humans cannot always and in fact usually don't, understand; God and his plans are above human comprehension. Secondly, although the Torah is meant to be a stabilizing document embedded with social rules of familial law and conduct, not everything in the human realm falls so easily into such categories. The



Torah, while producing instructions on how to act and live, also allows leeway for situations that simply do not fit the mold of social laws: the Torah is human and is self-reflectively human in how it allows its characters to be flawed.

Yet another story in Genesis that explores the relationships of brothers is the saga of Jacobs's twelve sons, and more specifically Joseph, the youngest son. Though Joseph was the youngest of Jacob's sons, he was by far Jacob's favorite. Jacob's other sons were resentful of this and schemed to sell Joseph into slavery (Gen. 37:1-36). Joseph through various trades and mishaps made his way to Egypt where he eventually became an important officer in the Pharaoh's court because of his ability to interpret dreams about the future (Gen. 37:40-41). Years later, Jacob sends his sons to Egypt to buy grain, since there was a famine in Canaan. As soon as the sons of Jacob reach the Pharaoh's palace, Joseph recognizes them and sends them back to their father to test them. After much back and forth between the unrevealed Joseph and Jacob via the other ten sons – Benjamin, the second youngest and son of the same mother as Joseph, was purposefully left behind because he is now his father's favorite son since Jacob believes that Joseph was killed – Benjamin is finally allowed by his father to journey to Egypt as Joseph demanded and thus Joseph is overwhelmed by emotion and unveils his true identity as their brother (Gen. 41-45). Surprisingly, Joseph is not at all angry with his brothers, but instead exclaims that it was God's will for him to come to Egypt and thus save the family, and Egypt, from famine and widespread starvation (Gen. 45:5-7).

Thus what began as a childish and malevolent act, in the end is understood as the manifestation of God's will. This story touches on many topics related to the message and psychology of the Torah. Like the story of Jacob and Esau, Joseph, the youngest, comes to be the most powerful and wealthy of all of his brothers through sheer mental capacity. This reversal of familial roles is again emphasized to demonstrate that for all of God's rules and commandments, we are but humans trying to make sense of a complex world. Most of life should follow the laws set out by God, but there will always be exceptions to these commandments that end up bettering the world and specifically Israel. Hence, though Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery because of their jealousy, they were in fact unknowingly following God's master plan. Throughout the Torah, there are many instances when God is clear about his plan, and others where he is almost absent from the decisions of his people. This story is obviously an example of the latter. As long as the people of Israel follow the plans of God, even if unintentionally, then God does not need to intervene or even present himself to his people: God will only actively instruct his people when he is forced to do so. Following from this understanding, Joseph recognizes God's will and forgives his brothers without hesitation. Here again is another theme of the Torah encapsulated by this story: forgiveness. Joseph realizes that his trauma and hardship were important to the survival of his people and thus does not dwell on the inhumane mistakes of his brothers. He recognizes his place in the larger story of the people of Israel and trusts God completely. An unlikely story in real life, readers of the Torah must remember that Joseph, like all characters in the Torah, is in a fiction and created on paper to exemplify

specific qualities and ideals. Seen in this regard, Joseph is the model of forgiveness for all the readers of the Torah to cite as their image of unwavering belief in God and utter acceptance of the role God has chosen for them. For this unfaltering belief, Joseph is rewarded with being the savior of his family and thus the continuation and reunification of the people of Israel.

### *Holiness of the Male Sperm*

The important of purity of the male bloodline to the biblical authors is also very clear through the significance demonstrated by the ritual of swearing by a man's thigh (Gen. 24:9). Whether this passage is a euphemism for the man's testicles or simply represents a body part close to the testicles is irrelevant, swearing by a man's thigh is implying that the most sacred part of the man's body is in fact his genitalia: his ability to procreate. Continuing the Torah's obsession with the male bloodline, this is yet another example of to what high regard the Torah holds a man's ability to continue to produce more children and thus populate Israel. The bloodline must be maintained and must be protected. A man's genitalia is the keeper of this mental and physical need for further generations. Going along with most patriarchal systems, the male sex is revered for its ability to produce children, while the female sex is considered unclean. This issue of sexual purity based on gender will be explored later.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Counting

Similar to the concept of obsessively keeping records of genealogies, the theme of counting – of people, goods, land, time, etc. – recurs many times throughout the Torah. Even the examples of the long lists of genealogies as described before exemplify this compulsive nature of the Torah or the Torah authors. While most Torah scholars do not believe that the numbers in various countings are realistic, the fact that those numbers are listed in the Torah demonstrates the psychological factors contributing to the authors' and redactors' psyche while writing. The authors desired to represent the situation of Israel in the most favorable light even if that meant misrepresenting the truth. As such a small people in a world of much greater and more powerful peoples - like the Babylonians, Persians and the Egyptians - the desire to exaggerate one's people's significance is understandably large (Mullen 57, 71, 87, 130, 319).

#### *Creation of the Tribes of Israel: Misrepresentation of Number of People*

The opening lines of the Book of Numbers are God instructing Moses and Aaron to take a census of all the males above the age of twenty in Israel. From this census the twelve tribes of Israel are established (Num. 1:1-16). This census is created both to determine how many people populate the nation of Israel as it wanders through the desert of Sinai and an attempt to create social order by dividing people into designated tribes or “ancestral house[s]” (Num. 1:4). By segregating the people into specific tribes, Moses

and Aaron have created a hierarchy of roles within each group. Now, each tribe has its own specific leader to go to and who in turn can go to the group of leaders to address issues. While this is an important step in organizing any group of people, it is noteworthy that the authors of the Torah go into such detail in the Torah to discuss the ordering of the people, as if to emphasize the vast number of people that would be lost without such social order.

Not only does the Book of Numbers describe and divide up the people into specific clans, but it also lists specific numbers of how many people (or men above the age of twenty) are in each tribe (Num. 1:20-43). Again, these numbers are outrageously high, but as explained before are important to the psyche of the Israelites. Using these divisions, the tribes can easily be placed in specific locations surrounding and thus protecting the tabernacle (Num. 2). Later in the Book of Numbers, both the issues of miscegenation and counting of people recur. The people of Israel, while “staying at Shittim... began to have sexual relations with the women of Moab. These [Moabites] invited the [Israelite] people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the [Israelite] people ate and bowed down to their [Moabite] gods” (Num. 25:1-2). God becomes very angry and commands the chiefs of the tribes to kill all those who have done any of these forbidden deeds (Num. 25:4). Here again, the Torah reinforces the ideas of absolutely no miscegenation and no honoring of other gods. After the guilty have been killed, yet another census is taken of all the males of Israel above the age of twenty (Num. 26:2). This continual reevaluation of the number of Israelites again highlights the importance of demonstrating the large population of the nation. The counting of people does not only occur in

the Book of Numbers however. The Book of Ezra – not part of the Torah but one of the books of the Hebrew Bible – also lists the number of Israelites returning to Jerusalem and Judah from an exile in Babylonia (Ezra 2.2-58). Other examples of listing the genealogies and numbers of people are in the Book of Nehemiah: Neh. 7:5-72;10:1-27;11:4-12:26.

### *Effort to Show Documentation of a Long History*

Although in all likelihood the people of Israel were at this time small in number, the Torah's authors go to great lengths to represent Israel as a large and powerful nation. In a world where the Israelites were most likely highly overpowered and indeed possibly ruled by the Babylonians or Persians, the attempt to have a documented, though falsified, history of the once powerful nation of Israel would ease the minds of many Israelites (Mullen 57, 319). In this way, the Israelites could revel in their people's past and have faith that they would once again be returned to the wealth and power they had in the years of the Torah. Similarly, is the fear that because the Israelites were so small in number, there was a threat of assimilation and miscegenation. Both of these would in fact destroy Israel forever, taking away its independence as an ethnic nation and its pure bloodline.

### *Counting and Allocation of Goods and Land*

The separation of the tribes is also important in making sure that all of Israel gets its fair share of goods and land. In order to establish who should get what and how much of it, the division of the tribes ensures equality

among the tribes and thus social peace. After Israel comes back from war with the Midianites, God instructs Moses about how to specifically divvy up the booty to all the people of Israel, making sure to give shares to the warriors, the congregation and the Levites, who run and take care of the tabernacle (Num. 31:27-47). In addition, God also orders Moses to divide up the land of Canaan to give to each tribe so that all the tribes have land to dwell and farm on and do not fight amongst themselves (Num. 34:16-29). These are important clarifications for God to make, and for the authors of the Torah to make, because they demonstrate both the equality of the tribes and the notion that all of Israel is blessed with more than they need. The readers of the Torah thus learn the importance of equality and only taking what has been given to them by God.

The precise amounts of goods given as sacrifices are also clearly described in detail in the Book of Ezra 6:16-17;8:24-30;8:34-36. This documentation of sacrificed goods signifies the Israelites' commitment and dedication to God that the authors' of the Torah hope to instill in the readers. By showing what was done in the past and the strong loyalty the Israelites' had to God, the authors' are setting an example for readers to follow: this is what your ancestors did and thus it is what you should do as well. The authors' are implicitly explaining the importance of giving back to God as a way of showing one's reverence for him.

### *Importance of the Number Forty*

Throughout the Torah, two numbers appear again and again in many different contexts: forty and seven. Both these numbers hold important meanings. Forty is approximately the lifespan for a person at that time and seven is one of the most fundamental units of time: the week. Although these are the basic meanings behind these numbers, the numbers are used in various other contexts as well, creating order and logic in a world without it.

Twice in the Torah the number forty is used in terms of days instead of years, but still denotes the same significance. In the story of Noah and the ark, God warned that, "For in seven days I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights" (Gen. 7.4). Although this is clearly referring to days and not years, the number forty here serves to represent a full life cycle. God is angry with the world and wants to renew it and thus wipes out all of humanity, except for the chosen few. While this number can be read as a simply a random chosen number, one must remember that nothing in the Torah is by accident. Multiple authors and redactors wrote and edited this document and thus the fact that the number forty is used is noteworthy. The same symbolism is used when Moses goes up to Mount Sinai for forty days and forty nights (Exo. 24:18). Though Moses is only gone for forty days, it is representative of a lifetime. These two uses of the number forty are both turning points in the Torah. Noah is to start a new population of the earth and Moses is to finally lead Israel into the Promised Land. The two events are so momentous that they must take a representative lifetime.



The most familiar use of the number forty in the Torah is when Moses brings Israel out of Egypt and the people must wander the desert for forty years before God will bring them to the promised land. As the people flee Egypt they time and time again plead with Moses and Aaron to go back to Egypt, fearing the unknown more than the known of slavery. God gets very angry at Israel and proclaims that no Israelite (above the age of twenty besides Caleb, son of Jephunneh, and Joshua, son of Nun, who stood up against the congregation in defense of God) that is alive at that moment will live to see the Promised Land, but will rather die in the wilderness. Only the descendants of the Israelite slaves of Egypt will live to see the Promised Land and enjoy all its wealth. God explains to Moses, to tell the people, that because of their faltering trust in God they will remain in the wilderness for forty years for each of the forty days that Moses was atop Mount Sinai (Num. 14:26-35) (Mullen 194). The slaves of Egypt had been slaves too long to know the freedom and wealth they were previously denied. The people cannot even comprehend a world that is better for them than slavery: a person taught to be a slave will always see him- or herself as a slave. The people cannot see that God has a greater plan for them: a plan that will bring them great wealth, happiness, and, most of all, freedom.

### *Importance of the Number Seven*

Like the number forty, the number seven is used for many different purposes throughout the Torah. From the first lines of Genesis, the concept of the seven-day week is established. God creates the heavens and the earth in

six days and then sets aside the seventh day as a day of rest: the Israelite week mimics this ordering of time (Gen. 1:1-2:4) (Mullen 96). The concept of the week structures Israel's understanding of time, thus creating order in time: the days are not just independent experiences, but rather life rotates on a weekly schedule. Thus the human need for order and meaning is reinforced by the weekly structure of time. One of God's oft repeated and emphasized commandments is to keep the Sabbath and allow no work or any kind to be done on that day. Looking at the Sabbath from a stricken logistical standpoint it makes sense that having one day out of seven to rest would be important for the human psyche. The Torah strongly emphasizes hard work, but also recognizes the need for rest and recuperation. By forcing the people of Israel to take a day of rest, the Torah is actually creating a system where more can be accomplished and the people can be happier. In addition to the psychological rest the Sabbath allows, it also creates a specific time every week when one is supposed to remember God and all that he has done for his people. Again, by leaving a day for only rest and reflection, the Torah is strengthening Israel's relationship with God by allotting them time to thank and remember him.

Though seemingly an arbitrary number, there are many reasons why seven is actually the perfect number to hold such significance. Both days of seven and years of seven mark the most fundamental units of time for Israel. God commands Israel to leave their farming land fallow every seventh year (Exo. 23:10-11). While this commandment is a reinterpretation of allowing the world to rest on a seven-cycle system, it has actually been scientifically

proven that allowing farming land a year of non-planting makes the land more plentiful the following year. The ground needs time to regain all the nutrients that have been pulled out from the previous years of planting. Another example of the seven-year cycle is the Torah's rules about slaves. The Torah states that all slaves must be released from bondage after seven years of servitude (Exo. 21:2-6). Here, the Torah is establishing a standard of morality for keeping slaves. Once slaves themselves, the Torah instructs Israel that they must have stricter moral boundaries for themselves and thus how they treat and keep their slaves. In this use of the number seven, the Torah is creating a moral code by which the Israelites are commanded to live by. The Torah holds Israel to a much higher moral standard than other peoples and thus throughout the Torah a strict moral code is described.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Creation of Moral Codes and Laws

The word Torah itself means the law and though the five books of Moses tell the story of creation through to Moses, the entirety of the Torah is in fact both implicitly and explicitly outlining the God's law for Israel (Mullen 25). The Torah explains that if you do all that God tells you to than you will prosper and remain God's chosen people, but if you do wrong by God than he will surely punish you and possibly reject all of Israel (Deut. 4:1-24) (Mullen 108). These laws that God instructs his people to live by are important for the concept of Israel. The laws create social order and give the people something to both live by and life for: rules give us reason. Humanity needs to understand life as a meaningful enterprise with boundaries and explanations. The Torah gives Israel exactly this: a way of understanding and knowing their place and purpose in the world. These commandments are especially important for the small population of the Israelites; it ensures their legitimacy for the land and a means of properly protecting and cultivating it. The Torah creates the concept of the people of Israel, thus giving the people a feeling of belonging through community. As social animals, humans need to feel part of something bigger than just their singular self. The Torah and its rules provide this sense of ethnicity, thus easing anxieties of belongingness of its followers.

## *Implicit Laws*

Most of the implicit laws in the Torah come in the way of stories. Specifically in Genesis and Exodus, the reader is supposed to read into the meaning behind the stories that are described: the morals or rules illustrated by the text are not always spelled out but rather necessitate some analysis. While this ambiguity leaves room for different interpretations, there are some stories that clearly inform the reader to do or not to do specific things. While all interpretations leave room for personal bias, this paper will attempt to stick to the most obvious morals or laws described by the stories.

Most of the implicit laws of the Torah come from stories that explain the punishment for disobeying God, usually explicitly explained by God himself. At least four times in the Book of Genesis a story is told that clearly provides harsh punishments for not following God's commandments. The first, and probably the most emblematic, is the story of Adam, Eve, and the serpent. The serpent is guilty of persuading Eve to eat from the tree of knowledge, Eve of eating from the tree of knowledge and instructing Adam to also eat, and Adam of following his wife's suggestion. All three are punished and thrown out of the Garden of Eden. God proclaims to the serpent that it is doomed to move "upon your belly you shall go, /and dust you shall eat", while

[t]o the woman he said,  
'I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing;  
in pain you shall bring forth children,  
yet your desire shall be for your husband,

and he shall rule over you” and finally “to the man he said,

...

cursed is the ground because of you;

in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;

...

you are dust,

and to dust you shall return (Gen. 3:14-19).

Thus from this one crucial transgression, all of the world’s history begins.

The other three stories in Genesis about obeying God revolve around the punishment of utter destruction if one does not follow the ways of God. As early as the sixth chapter in Genesis, God has already become unhappy with the people he has created and decides to flood the entire world, saving only Noah, his family, and two of every non-human creature on earth (Gen. 6:5-9:28). Similarly, God decides to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah because there are no good people within those cities. Interestingly, Abraham attempts to save the cities, bargaining with God that if he can find a certain number of good people within the cities than God should surely not kill the good with the bad (Mullen 140). Unfortunately Abraham is only able to find one good man, Lot, and so God orders Lot to take his family and flee to a neighboring city, Zoar, before God destroys Sodom and Gomorrah. God instructs Lot and his family to leave the cities and not look back, but Lot’s wife, in her very human instinct of curiosity, looks back at her city only to be punished by being turned into a column of salt (Gen. 18:20-19:29). In both stories, the people, either of the entire world or just the citizen of Sodom and Gomorrah, have been wicked and neglected God and thus are totally

annihilated. From these stories the reader understands the importance of following God and all of his commandments for fear of such a severe punishment. Even more interesting than the destruction of the world and the cities is the added story of Lot's wife. God punishes her for a human reaction. She is leaving her whole world behind her and merely glances back as she flees its destruction, and yet she is punished for just that. God's people must be better than human: Israel is held to a much higher standard than the rest of the world.

As the Torah progresses, God, in a way, gets more attached to his people and his creation of the world as a whole. This being said, his punishments become more isolated to specific people and less wide spread. When he is bringing the Israelites out of Egypt he punishes Moses, Aaron, and all the Israelites over the age of twenty by forcing them to wander the desert for forty years and thus never make it to the Promised Land (Num. 20:12;14:32-35). Now God is only punishing the specific people that have wronged him and not the entire population, thus allowing for Israel to continue as a people and multiply.

Many other morals or laws are described through stories in the Torah as well. Some as simple as the story of Cain and Abel and God punishing Cain and sending him off to Nod, a land east of Eden (Gen. 4:8-16). This story reinforces the command not to be jealous and to never to kill out of jealousy. Later on in Genesis, Abraham wants to purchase burial ground for his wife, Sarah, from a Hittite man named Ephron son of Zohar. Ephron offers to give the land to Abraham for free, but Abraham insists on paying its full value; the

two men are very respectful of each other, but Ephron finally concedes and accepts Abraham's payment (Gen.1-16) (Mullen 144-145). This discussion between Abraham and Ephron exemplifies how all of Israel is supposed to act towards neighboring peoples. Israel is usually in a foreign land and must understand the common courtesies that come with being a stranger in the land of others. Conversely, when Israel does come to own Canaan, they must know the rules about how to treat foreigners in their land. Just as the reader learned the burial rites when reading about the death of Sarah, the reader also learns about mourning rituals when Jacob dies. Joseph allots seven specific days to mourn his father and then carries his father to the cave, which Abraham bought to bury Sarah in, and buried Jacob there (Gen. 50:7-14). Again, the readers of the Torah learn implicitly here the burial and mourning rites allowed and prescribed by God.

### *Explicit Laws*

As described above, the Torah literally means the law and almost the entirety of the books of Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy are composed of lists of commandments and rules pertaining to all areas of life and religion. From this holy document all of the laws of Israel are derived. From leprosy to monetary disputes to sexual purity, the Torah instructs the reader on the correct method of following God's commandments. Thus, the Torah is a history of the world, a history of the primordial Hebrews, a history of Israel, and at last an instruction manual for how the Israelites of that time should live their lives in order to be good in the eyes of God (Mullen 63-69).



The most important of all the laws of the Torah are the Ten Commandments. God cites these Ten Commandments as the most central in the whole religion. As first detailed, and as most modern Jews define them as, the Ten Commandments are:

[1] I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; [2] you shall have no other gods before me. [3] You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. [3] You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. [4] Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it. [5] Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. [6] You shall not murder. [7] You shall not commit adultery. [8] You shall not steal. [9] You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour. [10] You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour (Exo. 20:2-17).

These Ten Commandments are repeated again in almost exactly the same words in Deut. 5:6-21. Although the Torah lists multitudes of laws and commandments, these ten are viewed as the most crucial and significant to Israel. As the reader notes, the first four of the Ten Commandments all

concern obedience to God and the rejection of all other gods and their earthly representations. The fourth concerns keeping the Sabbath as described earlier, while the fifth through the tenth all concern laws creating social order within Israel. The fact that six out of the ten most important commandments concern standard rules of establishing a peaceful and productive community is noteworthy because it demonstrates the fact that the Torah is in fact a guide to creating a working and sustainable society.

Other important rules God commands his people to obey involve actively helping and aiding others in need. The Torah instructs all of Israel to take care of his or her neighbor's property and not take advantage of them (Deut. 22: 1-4). Unlike most modern countries' laws, the Torah demands that Israel take personal responsibility for others; a person is not just guilty for hurting another but also for choosing not to help another. The people of Israel should share as much as they can with their neighbors in need and hold no grudge against them for it: part of being a member of Israel is the mutual agreement to help each other as much as possible (Deut. 15: 7-11). In addition to helping one's neighbor, God commands Israel to specifically leave parts of their crop unharvested so that "the alien, the orphan, and the widow" may have a means of feeding themselves (Deut. 24:19). The Torah goes far beyond the moral responsibility to do no harm and includes the accountability of also doing good and helping others in their time of need.

The Torah does not only instruct its readers on morality, but also constructs laws for setting up necessary societal structures. One significant example of this are the commandments for how to set up a legal system

(Mullen 195-196). God instructs his people to “appoint judges and officials throughout [their] tribes, in all [their] towns” so that justice can be dealt fairly and evenly (Deut. 16:18). God warns against bribes (Deut. 16:19), defines strict rules for the number of witnesses needed to execute a criminal (Deut. 17:6) and details the punishments for bearing false witness (Deut. 19:15-21). The Torah is again establishing a system under which a successful and productive society can prosper; it is instituting rules that help the nation of Israel become a sustainable and independent society.

#### *Explicit Laws about Sex and Marriage*

As part of the pronouncements for transgressions, the Torah goes into great detail about the repercussions for rape, adultery, and non-virginity before married. Deut. 22:13-30 details the punishments for several different scenarios of rape and accusations of non-virginity at marriage. All the various situations are classified as specific crimes with prescribed punishments for each precise circumstance. The punishments for adulterous women are previously mentioned Num. 5:16-22. The significance of such laws is noteworthy because they illustrate a real and crucial fear for the Israelites: the pollution of the Abrahamic bloodline. Sexual purity, specifically in the case of the female, is essential for maintaining that only pure descendents of Abraham get to reap the benefits given to Israel by God. Since sexual purity is such an important issue in the Israelite world, both in knowing the father of every child and ensuring no miscegenation, it makes sense that the

punishments for such acts would be severe: thus, in most cases, the violators are put to death (Mullen 145).

Though miscegenation is highly disapproved of in most cases in the Torah, there are some exceptions allowed. In the case of female captives, a warrior is allowed to take a woman as his wife if he follows specific guidelines over an extended period of time (Deut. 21:10-14). This scenario is interesting in the context of the rest of the Torah because it allows a disruption in the Abrahamic bloodline. The only reason this exception is permitted is because the woman must “shave her head, pare her nails, discard her captive’s garb, and” go through a full month of “mourning for her father and mother” before she can be married (Deut. 21:12-13). She must undergo a month long rejection of her former life in order to fully accept her new role as an Israelite woman. In a sense, the captive woman undergoes an ethnic transformation into part of Israel and since, at the time of the writing of the Torah, ethnicity ran through the father the children could still be safely considered a member of the people of Israel.

### *Sexual Purity*

In addition to issues of miscegenation and virginity, the concept of cleanliness for both men and women are important in the Torah. Any emission of semen by a man that is not inside a woman is deemed unclean and he must wash himself and wait until evening to be clean again. A woman is unclean every time she bares a child, menstruates, or has any irregular vaginal discharges. Like the men, these women must undergo a bathing, and

various other rituals depending on the situation (Lev. 12:1-8;15:16-32). It is significant that the Torah deliberately commands the people of Israel to deal with these issues of cleanliness in specific ways for various reasons. One is for purely hygienic and sanitary reasons, but more importantly controlling the groups sexual purity is also, in many ways, controlling their sexuality. One of humanity's most basic instincts is procreation and society's most important need is procreation in order to continue and populate the society. Thus, controlling the sexuality of the population is the epitome of social control.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: The Marking of Israel**

One of the most important aspects of Israel is God's desire to make his chosen people purposefully and conspicuously stand out among all other peoples. Second to the importance of the purity of the bloodline is the importance of designating your membership in Israel. This marking of oneself demonstrates both an exterior display of one's membership in Israel and an external promise to abide by the laws of God and the Torah. The Torah demands that each Israelite, specifically men, outwardly show their membership in Israel: demonstrated both by external markings on the body, in clothing, circumcision, dietary laws, etc., and in the holidays and markings of the houses. To be a true member of Israel, you must outwardly assert your membership and display it for all other people to recognize.

### *The Covenant of Circumcision*

God's first covenant with his people, made with Abraham, is the covenant to circumcise every male from Abraham down in return for making the descendants of Abraham wealthy and plentiful (Gen. 17:9-14). While this seems like an odd request for God to make, especially since God specifically made man in his image, circumcision actually serves three significant purposes for the Israelite people: God's mark on every male from the age of eight days until death, the first example of external membership, and a level of sexual control. Starting on the eighth day of a male child's life, he is officially marked as a member of Israel by the fact that he has been

circumcised, a procedure that was then only done to Israelites (unlike the modern United States). In a world where same-sex nudity was not uncommon, circumcision was a clear indication of being an Israelite. No male member of Israel could ever pass himself off as a non-Israelite in another city because of his circumcision: his membership in Israel is forever marked on his body. The authors' of the Torah attempted to ensure that those male children born of Israelites will be committed to God and thus all of his commandments.

Another possible intention of circumcision is the fact that by removing the foreskin of the penis, one is actually decreasing the sensitivity of the glans, or tip. While in modern times this usually affects the man very little except in appearance, in the time of the writing of the Torah this may have actually resulted in substantial desensitizing. Regardless of whether this is true, desensitizing the penis is yet another symbolic gesture of giving something up for God. Like all generations, male genitalia is considered sacred because of its ability to produce children: any sacrifice of the male genitalia is a great show of commitment to God. Except for circumcision, the Torah clearly states that one cannot make any marks on his or her skin, by knife or tattoo, and should leave some patches of hair uncut, both on the head and beard, in order to mark externally him or her as an Israelite (Lev. 19:27-28).

### *Dietary Laws*

In addition to bodily methods of marking oneself, the Torah instructs its readers to make many life-style changes in order to demonstrate their obedience to God. The strictest of these laws dictate the dietary habits of Israel (Mullen 233). The Torah describes in detail which animals and fish Israel is allowed to eat and which they are not (Lev. 11:1- 30). Not only are Israelites not allowed to eat many different kinds of food, but also they are restricted even further in how and where they can eat the foods they can eat. One restriction specifically mentioned in the Torah is that Israel is only allowed to drink wine in God's sanctuary (Deut. 12:17). This rule is significant in the authors' attempt to create social order by essentially outlawing drunken debauchery and only allowing alcohol as a means of enhancing religious experiences. These dietary laws set Israel apart from the other peoples of the area because it means that Israelites cannot dine at the tables foreigners, but must insist on preparing their own Torah-allowed meal. Thus, these laws restrict whom Israel can interact with and on what terms they interact: Israel must always be the host and never the guest. This isolation creates a stronger and more united community because it sets the Israelites apart from others and creates a defined in-group.

### *External Bodily and House Markings*

Other markings that the Torah instructs all men to wear are tzitzit and tefillin. God tells Moses to have all the men of Israel wear "fringes on the corners of their garments throughout their generations and to put a blue cord



on the fringe at each corner” called tzitzit (Num. 15:38). These fringes are meant to remind Israel of “all the commandments of the Lord and do them, and not follow the lust of your own heart and your own eyes. So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and you shall be holy to your God” (Num. 15:39-40). Similar to tzitzit’s constant reminder, since the fringes are worn everyday, the Torah also commands all men to wear tefillin so that when they pray, God’s words will be bound “as a sign on your hand” and “as an emblem on your forehead” (Deut. 6:4-9). Tefillin are small leather boxes filled with scrolls of prayers that are then bound to a mans’ arm and forehead in a specific manner while he prays. Both tzitzit and tefillin mark the man as an Israelite for all the world to see and recognize, but also so that all Israelites know who is their kinsmen.

Similar to the marking of Israel on the body, both literally on the body or in dress, the Torah also commands Israel to mark their doorposts with the words of God, in modern times contained in a mezuzah (Deut. 6:9). This tradition stems from the last of the plagues inflicted on Egypt before Israel is allowed to flee from bondage. God instructs all the people of Israel to slaughter a lamb and then “take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses” in order to designate those homes as members of Israel so God will pass over those houses as he goes from house to house killing the first born of every family, both human and animal. Thus, the marking of the houses is both a sign that those houses are in fact homes of Israelites, but also it serves as a reminder to all of Israel of the great things God did for his people when he freed them from bondage in Egypt.

## *Holidays*

Another significant aspect of the Torah is all the holidays that Israel is instructed to observe (Mullen 242). Holidays play a crucial role in the ordering of the year because they provide a rhythm and clear order to the year. They also ensure reminders of Israel's commitment to God and following his laws. Many specific holidays are described in detail in the Torah and are still practiced today, but there are also many that holidays that are only described in passing and are not named. Num. 28:26-29:38 describes multiple days of sacrificing with very detailed and specific requirements for each day. These sacrifices are significant because they demonstrate the length to which all Israelites are supposed to go to honor God on these days. The Torah states that it is not enough to just follow all the commandments, though one must do that as well, but also honor God in these prescribed ways. These holidays serve as a reminder of all that God has done for his chosen people and thus reinforces the obligation to follow all of his commandments.

Two of the most important holidays in Israel's calendar discussed in the Torah are Shabbat and the Passover. Shabbat, or the Sabbath, is the weekly holiday stemming from the story of creation as detailed earlier (Gen. 2:2-3). It is important to note though, that Shabbat is in fact a holiday, even though it occurs every week. Shabbat marks the Israelites because it means that no Israelite can do any work (work defined very loosely to include cooking, carrying things, etc.) from Friday night at sun down to Saturday night at sun down. During Israel's forty days of wandering they were not

even allowed to collect food on Shabbat, but instead had to collect double the necessary food the day before in preparation for the Sabbath (Exo. 16:23). This day becomes even more significant when Israel is settled in towns and cities because it further separates the Israelites from the other peoples around them.

Passover is also a very important holiday because it remembers all that God did for Israel when leading them out of bondage in Egypt. As the people leave Egypt, the Torah instructs the reader, on the first day of the seven day long holiday, to “tell your child on that day, ‘It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt’” (Gen. 13:8). There are two significant aspects to note in this sentence: one, the understanding that God did many great miracles to bring the Israelites out of Egypt and two, the use of the present personal pronoun. Twice in the Torah the authors’ describe the Passover holiday in great detail, demonstrating its central purpose and crucial reminder of what God did for Israel in their time of need in Egypt (Exo. 12:14-20; Deut. 16:1-8). The second significant aspect, the use of the present personal pronoun, is noteworthy because it essentially defines how the reader of the Torah is supposed to approach it. For Israel, the Torah is not past, but present. Everything that God did for his people in the past, he did for his people in the present as well because of the fact that by saving and choosing the Abrahamic line, God created the people of Israel that exist today and into the future. The Torah commands its readers to explain to their children that this is what God did for us, not what God did for them (Exo. 13:3-10; Deut. 6:20-23). In this way, the holiday of Passover is important to

Israel because it simultaneously reminds the reader of what God did for the people of Israel and creates a personal relationship between the reader and God. In addition, Passover also serves as another way of marking Israel and making them stand out. For an entire week Israel must eat nothing that has been leavened and must do no work except preparing meals. Like Shabbat, Passover's strict rules about working marks the observers as Israelites.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### God is Both Omnipotent and Ignorant

One of the most significant aspects of the Torah is the fact that although God is supposed to have written the Torah, or at least have had Moses write it for him, throughout the entirety of the five books of Moses the authors go back and forth describing God as, at different times, *both* omnipotent and ignorant of what Israel is doing. In addition to these contradictions, God is portrayed as the all knowing Freudian father, creating a patriarchal social system that, like all other patriarchies, keeps the population in line by prescribing the assumptions and positions of all people based almost entirely on sex and age. The Torah shows a God that displays fundamental human qualities – such as neediness, mistrust, anger, rage, etc. – while setting up a patriarchal social system that brings together all the other psychological forces discussed above into one strong, powerful social bond which will ensure that the community of Israel lives on for generations.

#### *God Displays Human Qualities*

Although God is presented as all knowing, he very often expresses his need to be shown Israel's loyalty and love of him: if God were truly omnipotent, then these gestures of proof would be unnecessary simply because God would already know the true intentions of his people. In the Torah, God instructs his people to build for him a great shrine in the desert to demonstrate tangibly their love and devotion to him (Exo. 25:8-9). Again, these grand gestures of sacrifices and prayer would be superfluous if God

truly was omnipotent and could see into the hearts of Israel. The purpose of these actions, as instructed by the Torah, is to create a psychological connection for the people of Israel with God. From a psychological point of view, it makes sense that Israel needs to have prescribed and described methods of praising their God in order for them to feel a constant connection to him. Without these actions, Israel would get mentally lost in the work of everyday life and forget about the most important aspect that brings the community together: their belief in God and the Torah.

God needs his people to fulfill all of his commandments and desires. In order to demonstrate to Israel his ultimate power, God executes twelve plagues on all of Egypt in order to exhibit his supremacy (Exo. 10:4-12:30). After each plague, God “hardened [the] Pharaoh’s heart” so that “he would not let the Israelites go” (Exo. 10:20). Why does God make the Pharaoh purposefully not let Israel go eleven times if the singular goal was to free the Israelites from Egyptian slavery? The authors of the Torah must have written this intentionally: by allowing God to show his power over and over again, they are further reinforcing the Israelites’ awe and trust in him. God does not need to prove anything to the Pharaoh, as the text implies, but rather Israel must be given twelve more reasons for why God should be trusted, loved and revered (Mullen 178). God has chosen the Israelites to be his people and he will go to great lengths to protect them and bring them to glory.

In addition to being ignorant of his people’s inner thoughts, God also very often somehow misses the mental and moral wanderings of his people, leading him to have to punish those that have transgressed in order to

remind the others of his power and wrath. When time and time again Israel complains to God as he leads them out of Egypt (Exo. 14:10-14;16:1-3;17:3), God usually punishes some to set an example for the rest of Israel to understand. The most well known of these instances is the story of the building of the golden calf. While Moses was atop Mount Sinai receiving the word of God, the Torah, the Israelites got increasingly anxious and fearful that Moses would not return to them. In an effort to ease the minds of the people, Aaron collected all the gold from the people and melted it into the form of a calf. When God realized what Aaron and the Israelites were doing he sent Moses down from Mount Sinai to punish the people. At first, God was going to kill all the people and found a new chosen nation, but Moses pleaded with him to be forgiving and only punish some of the people to set an example for all the others (Exo. 32:1-35). The reader of the Torah is left to wonder, if God was indeed omnipotent than how did he not see the anxiety and fear of his people beforehand? How did God not anticipate the making of the golden calf? This story is a clear example of God's ability to be both ignorant and shortsighted; in this story God embodies the failings of humanity not the all-powerfulness of a deity. Not only does God lack omnipotence in this instance but he is also persuaded by Moses to change his mind and not destroy all of Israel (Mullen 117). Here, again, the authors of the Torah describe God in human terms: able to be persuaded and calmed down. This story is just one example of many, but it demonstrates God's less than perfect oversight of his people's needs and his inability to know and thus determine the future.

### *God is the Freudian Father of Israel*

In the Torah, God never destroys the entirety of Israel for two reasons: one, although he is a wrathful God he uses his anger to force Israel into obedience and, two, the entire purpose of the Torah is to create a background for Israel and set up a social system for the Israelites to live by (what would the use of the Torah be if there were no people to follow it?). The angry God of the Torah is very similar to the Freudian concept of the relations between fathers and children. Through strict discipline and punishment, the child (Israel) learns the correct manner to act and obey the father (God). The child constantly disobeys the father in order to test the boundaries of their relationship. This interaction is similar to that described in the Torah of God and his people. The people, who act as a whole, do wrong and are punished for it, learning step by step how to appease God and keep him happy. Thus, the authors of the Torah used some very basic and only recently understood human psychology to shape Israel into the social system that they wanted it to be.

### *The Torah Creates a Patriarchal System*

The social system conceived, established and continued through the Torah is very similar to many that came before it and even more that have come after. The Torah creates a fairly standard patriarchal system which privileges the older males of a specific line (the Priests and the Levites) and disenfranchises women. Everyone of every age, sex, and familial lineage knows exactly what position and place he or she has in the social system and



thus in the greater world around them. The Torah defines for every person what he or she must do and not do in order for the people as a whole to exist for generations upon generations. One of the most significant methods of reinforcing this social system is the mere fact that the people are called Israel, as in the God given name of their ancestral father, Jacob (Mullen 67). Not only are they the descendents of Jacob, but also they are by definition Jacob calling themselves Israel. The people define their own beings by the name of one of their ancestors. While this might seem like an unimportant fact to dwell on, one must recognize the psychological impact of how one is named. Not only are these people members of a group, but also the group defines them. They are Israel and Israel is them.

Social order is both incredibly efficient in keeping everyone in line and continuing the status quo but also necessarily creates a system of inequality, disenfranchisement, and cycles of poverty. For the Torah, however, this aspect of the social system is irrelevant. The Torah leaves no room for care for any individual, but instead focuses on the group as a whole. Just as the God of the Torah is willing to wipe out large portions of the population of Israel in one single punishment, the Torah attempts to create rules, commandments, and boundaries that will possibly help the individual, but above all continue the maintenance of the group. Reinforcing this idea of social group above any individual is the fact that the last two men named in the Torah (except for two men merely mentioned in passing) are Moses and Aaron and they are not allowed into the Promised Land: the people of Israel are meant to be a people, a nation, not a group of individuals. The Torah is a

master text developed, conceived, and organized to create a stable and long lasting nation by setting up a patriarchal, hierarchal, and bureaucratic social system.

## Conclusion

Everything that the Torah is has been written with the intent of creating a stable and long-lasting social system for the people of Israel. All of the commandments, rules, regulations, and demands were created in order to establish this system. All people, in order to be a part of a functional society, must play by some greater set of established rules: for the Israelites of the day the Torah consisted of these rules. Whether all the specifications in Torah were supposed to have been fully realized in the time it was written or whether it was merely an idealized goal to work towards, the Torah nonetheless describes a social system that all Israelites could understand together as a community (Mullen 65).

Though the Torah is the holy text of all of the different sects of Judaism, the Israelite religion and the different sects of Judaism are clearly very different and demand different things from their followers (Mullen 317). The roots of all Judaisms are based in the Torah but all subcategories of Judaism read and understand the Torah in specific and self-determined ways. Different readings of the Torah may seem like a contradiction in and of itself, but, in reality, after passing through the hands of millennia of readers, how could the Torah not be understood in so many different ways? It is only natural that the Torah has been understood and redefined in many different ways since its initial construction and may have even had different interpretations at that point as well. This difference in opinion is part of the psychology of the human mind: people will always read the same texts and come to different conclusions.

One common theme of the Torah, which has allowed it to survive throughout the millennia, is the fact that it provides reasoning for all the terrible parts of the world and in fact uses misery and discontent of the world in order to strengthen its connection with its followers. Following the example of the Israelites in bondage in Egypt, the Torah teaches its readers that horrific things will happen to the Israelite (Jews) but that God will eventually save them. According to the Torah, all the awful occurrences and events that have and will take place in the world are actually part of God's master plan and are meant to serve as reminders to all the Torah followers to remain strong and not veer from the Torah and its commandments.

The Torah has essentially provided solutions for all possible situations that might and will happen to its followers. Through good times and bad, the Torah is always the answer (Mullen 109). Through the Torah, people can make sense of the world: both its hardships and its miracles. What better way to create a long lasting established social system than by providing an answer to all of humanity's possible questions. The Torah will never lead the people astray and if the people are lead astray not only is it the people's fault but also they can only be redeemed through further belief and commitment to the Torah (Mullen 185).

The Torah plays on the psychological needs of all people and provides answers to all possible questions. The people of the Torah, now Jews, have an established and complete social system under which to understand the world and know their own specific place in it, even if this means greatly confining people to social roles. While most people agree that restricting people to

specific gender, age, and familial roles is detrimental to the individual, it does ensure a sound and self-sustaining social system. Without these roles people would get lost in the confusion of the world and thus be far less affective in maintaining such a prescribed social system. The Torah creates a social system that will theoretically continue on into infinity, but only if the people follow the strict laws and take their place in the said social system.

The authors of the Torah did not worry about the individual because in order for the Torah to continue for millennia, the people, not just one person, must accept the Torah and its social system in order to maintain it for generations and generations to come. Each person is merely a vehicle for the greater good of continuing the system. As God himself explains: "You are dust and to dust you shall return" (Gen. 3:19).

**“The world is young: the former great men call to us affectionately. We too must write Bibles, to unite again the heavens and the earthly world.**

**The secret of genius is to suffer no fiction to exist for us; to realize all that we know” – Ralph Waldo Emerson**

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

*Bible: New Revised Standard Version.* (1989). Available from <http://www.devotions.net/bible/00bible.htm>

*Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version.* (1962). New York City: A Meridian Book.

Mullen Jr., E. T. (1997). *Ethnic Myths and Pentateuchal Foundations: A New Approach to the Formation of the Pentateuch.* Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press.