

# And Yahweh Spoke to Moses in the Wilderness

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Using Talmudic Hermeneutics to Reveal  
The Secret of Moses' Sin at the Rock and  
The Secret of the Red Heifer Sacrifice

by Yaakov ben Avraham

*And Yahweh Spoke to Moses in the Wilderness*  
(Numbers 1:1)

by Yaakov ben Avraham

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**“And Moses called to all Israel, and he said to them: . . . ‘I am Yahweh, your God.’ ”**  
**(Deuteronomy 29:1-5)**





## Part I: The Great Escape — An Allegory

This is the story of the Johori.

Johori is the name of a magical family of little people, not one of them taller than the bedside table here in my room, where I, James Harrington Campbell, am lying in my bed under my big feather quilt, waiting for sleep. Papa is reading me my favorite Johori tale, the story of how the Al-Seidi people became the Johori people.

Papa's a writer, and he wrote all the Johori tales. They began as Papa's thoughts. Then he wrote them all down on long sheets of paper that he rolls in tight little rolls and stacks in neat little stacks in his library. Papa's library is right next to my bedroom, where I am right now. When it's time for me to go to sleep, Papa sits on the side of my bed, unrolls one of the long sheets of paper on which he writes all his Johori tales, and reads one of them to me. Tonight, he's reading the tale of how the Al-Seidi people became the Johoris. But I have another name for this tale. I like to call it *The Great Escape*.



As I explained, the Johoris are a band of magical little people with handsome bearded faces — the men, that is — and never a harsh word among them. Their bearing is dignified, and their hearts are so very light and untroubled that laughter or a chuckle is always sure to punctuate their warm conversation. Most Johoris are not fat, although a few would benefit from a bit less rum-bread and butter. Their beards — the men, that is — extend near the whole way to their belts, and they sport handsome felt waistcoats with shiny copper buttons, and felt caps with silver bells. Oh! One more thing... They run about barefooted, and they have furry

little feet upon which they can run near as fast as a horse, although not as far.

Papa tells the story of the Great Escape, and I've heard it many times before, and my feather quilt is warm, and soon I'll be asleep, but now I listen to Papa's strong, protective voice. Papa tells me so many stories about the magical world of the Johoris. Tales of how the seven planets became seven... of the first Johori king... of the many defenders of the Johori people, even before there were Johori kings. At that time, of course, they weren't called the Johori. At that time, they were the "*Al-Šeidi.*" It's all the same though, isn't it? That's what Papa says. When they were called the Al-Seidi, though, they weren't always happy, as they are now. Then, they were sometimes a bit dour, but still very good and also talented.

Then, as now, there were wise kings and foolish kings, kind kings and mean kings. And there was always someone to defend the magical, enchanted Land of Six Lights. You see, even in that world of happy magic, there are many dangers, because in that world one encounters the Sons of Sadness called the "*Āmal-Kūf.*" The Amal-Kuf are a bitter band of malcontents, who ever seek to disrupt the quiet repose of peaceful souls, and someone must lead the young and the brave to victory against these embittered malcontents, and that task falls to the Johori king.

He's a good king, and Papa tells so many tales about the king, and the tales of one king blend with the tales of the next king, until every good king seems to be so many faces of the same one Good King. Papa tells about how it came to be that the Johori king married a dark princess from the southern lands. Papa tells about the struggle for the throne that comes whenever a Johori king dies. Papa tells about the king's rascal brother, who seems to have a bit of Amal-Kuf blood flowing in his veins. Papa tells about how sometimes the dark-skinned queen plays a more prominent role, when that is what the Land of Six Lights needs. Papa describes how noble and good and kind and devout both the king and the queen are — friends to all, even to the king's troublesome brother. Papa says that the Johori king and his dark-skinned queen make God manifest in the Land.

Oh, the tales Papa tells of the king's brother. Those nights I jump at shadows and can't bring myself to close my eyes. I don't sleep a bit for being so scared! But the brother — Beshat is his name — is really so very good. That's the best part. He's such a source of trouble, but the ending is always happy. Beshat is like a strict schoolteacher, Papa explains, and then I know exactly what Papa means, because I had a strict teacher once, and I worked hard, and I came to know of my teacher's kind heart. So that's how I know that the king's brother is really very sweet, despite appearances to the contrary.

And Papa also tells many tales of the Land of Six Lights... He tells about a Land where grapes are as sweet as sugarcane and as big as watermelons, and where mountains are as steep as church steeples, and snow-covered on top, and so tunneled-through with caves that a Johori man need never build a house for his family; he need only find an uninhabited cave to make into a home. And the cave walls are made of shiny marble, the floors are glass, or pearl, or soft, dry moss, and the tunnels all connect deep in the hollow of the magical mountain. And outside! Outside, there are waterfalls as tall as giants, lakes as clear as crystal, evergreen trees as high as the valleys are deep, and no one need toil in the Land, for the soil is so fertile that its produce is naturally sufficient and delightfully satiating to every craving.

But the Land is not free of struggle. Although food and shelter are plentiful, the Amal-Kuf roam the Land, ready to poison the magical well from which flow the waters of cool-light-moon-peace. Papa will tell of all these things again tomorrow, or perhaps tomorrow's tomorrow. But right now, as I said, he's reading my very favorite Johori tale: *The Great Escape*, or as he likes to call it, *How the Al-Šeidi People Became the Johori*.

**The Johoris are a happy musical people. For them, music is prayer. The Johoris sing and delight in the produce of the Land, and through their song and delight, they serve God, for their song is the song of love and awe, and it brings tears of comfort and joy.**

That was Papa, telling about the Johori prayer songs. I'm too tired to talk anymore. I'll lie quiet beneath my feather quilt and listen, with you, to Papa . . . .

Once upon a time, the Johoris fell captive to the Amal-Kuf. The cruel Amal-Kuf enslaved the Johori people and forced them to work under the hot sun for a pittance of a wage, building cities for the Kings of Darkness. These were cities of lifeless dust, built with sweat and tears upon barren deserts of selfish pride, for the Amal-Kuf are a people who measure wealth by the poverty of others.

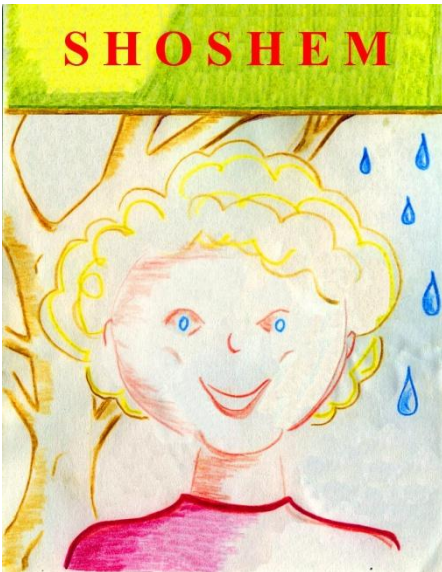
Amidst their suffering, the Johoris gathered each week in groups to chant their woeful tale, intoned in mournful melody and meter. They cried out. They appealed to God. And God, who is all gods, heard their cry, and the Johoris found a redeemer, and his name was . . . .

Papa pauses, as he always does at this point in the story, because he likes to create suspense. Then he continues...

The redeemer's name was... *Yohori-Šošem*, which means "Born-From-Johori," but most people called him "Shoshem."

At that time, the Johori people was called the "*Al-Šeidi*" people, and Johori was the name of a foreign god that the Al-Seidis did not trust. That's right, James, Johori is one of *God's* names. God has many names, of course, and God's name Johori comes from the southern lands,

from the dark-skinned people, from the very first knowers of the Truth-Before-Time. Shoshem had once been the student of these southern people, and he learned from them all the secret



wisdom, including the secret of Letters. And, that's how he got the name *Yohori-Šošem* — “Born-From-the-God-Johori.”

Some said that Shoshem was Al-Seidi by birth but that he had been adopted by a king of the southern lands and raised as a priest of Johori. It didn't matter. Whether or not Shoshem was Al-Seidi by birth, Shoshem led the Al-Seidi freedom struggle. Of course, Johori was the name Shoshem used when praying in private to God. In the southern language, it means “Give!” and it especially evokes God's kindness. Shoshem used the name Johori for God, but when the leaders of the Al-Seidi people asked him about God's name, Shoshem said: “*The Supreme One* sent me, the god of the Al-Seidi people; J'hoṅ is his hidden name.” The “n” of J'hoṅ is, of course, the “r” and the “i” of Johori, pushed together, with the “i” inverted.

Papa always shows me how the name is drawn on his roll of paper . . .

You have to understand, James, that the Al-Seidis are very proud of their name for God, and they considered Johori to be the name of an Amal-Kuf god. The Al-Seidis never would have allowed Shoshem to lead them if Shoshem had used the name Johori, so he found a way to hide it. The Al-Seidis did not yet understand that God is One and His name is One.

The Al-Seidis cried out to God, and God heard their cries. Shoshem donned a cloak of iridescent splendor, woven with letters of living light. He pulled a flaming sword from pure sapphire stone. He mounted a winged sphinx that hurled venom from its serpentine tail. He made the clouds his royal highway, the sky his canopy of glory. He descended upon the capital city of the Amal-Kuf, coming to a halt just outside the palace gate, in the center of the field of battle. King Shoshem studied the crowd to his left, the multitude to his right. Among the prisoners of the Amal-Kuf, he found the face of his beloved, the dark princess of the southern lands. He smiled a knowing smile. His eyes shone like bright stars, his silken hair flowed like the great white river. His hands rose above his head, framing the majesty of his glorious countenance.



The evil king stood in the watchtower above the field of battle and saw. He mounted a black steed and rode forth from the palace gate, like a shadow's shadow in a lightless night. The high priest of the Amal-Kuf remained behind, deep within the shelter of the palace walls, feverishly inscribing spells of cold bloodthirst. Face to face, the two kings stood, Shoshem upon his sphinx, the Shadowy One upon his dark steed. The evil king growled a foul curse and drew his two-edged sword. Shoshem again cast his gaze toward his beloved. His right hand remained firm; his left did not waver. The evil one advanced, his dissecting blade descending upon Shoshem with a frightening whir. Shoshem parried and returned a fiery blow; his flaming sword found its mark. Nine times, Shoshem struck down the evil king. Nine times, the evil one rose up again, like a fungus sprouting from the spot on the ground where his putrid blood had spilled.

The tenth incarnation of the evil one was fiercer than the other nine combined. He rose to the height of ten thousand men and growled with the voice of ten thousand voices. Then

he noticed the dark princess standing among the fettered slaves, and he realized the source of Shoshem's strength. With a monstrous left hand, the evil one hid from Shoshem's view her innocent face; he obscured from Shoshem's sight her empowering gaze. And then, with his massive right hand, he thrust the cold steel of his two-edged sword deep into Shoshem's chest. Shoshem groaned Death's groan. A groaning cry that bore the pain of every injustice ever wrought. There was no pain that was not expressed by that cry. A cry that froze the waters. Waterfalls clattered to the

ground like broken glass and then lay silent. A cry that arrested the heavens. The sun did not rise; the moon dared not stir.



For one terrible and agonizing moment, Shoshem's pure heart was cleft in two, and in that abyss, he looked Death straight in the eyes.

Then Shoshem uttered aloud the secret Name. The cold steel that pierced his heart melted like wax, hard metal flowed like a running stream. Suddenly, the evil king looked quite small and pitiful, his hands still extended but now grasping nothing, empty powerless hands stained with shameful memories. On that night, the Al-Seidis walked to freedom; on that morning, they sang praises to the God of Shoshem; on that day, they raised up a joyful noise in Johori's name.

Thus, Shoshem led the Al-Seidis to freedom from the Amal-Kuf, and he tried to teach them the great mysteries of

**Letters, and of Time, and of Truth-Before-Time, and of the Six Lights, and he tried also to teach them about the Seventh, but the Al-Seidis found reasons to hate Shoshem.**

“They were jealous, weren’t they, Papa? I get jealous sometimes, if someone does something that I can’t do or gets a lot of attention.”

**Yes, James, they were jealous. They distrusted Shoshem because he was different and because he had magic power. The Al-Seidis said: “We earned our redemption.” They complained that Shoshem was a foreigner who spoke a foreign tongue and worshipped a foreign god. They said that he was able to do what he did because of witchcraft and sorcery. They said that he wanted to make himself king over them. They even complained that he had a dark-skinned wife. They found all manner of things to say, because that’s the way the Al-Seidis are sometimes. But not the Johoris. The Johoris are a happy, peaceful people, not so calculating as the Al-Seidis.**

**It was during this time that the Al-Seidi people received the name Johori. As I explained, Johori is one of God’s ancient names, but Shoshem asked God to give it as a name for the Al-Seidi people, because he saw that the Al-Seidis were thinking as slaves think even after having gained their freedom. And nothing is as powerful as a name. A name can even change the heart. It was with the new name that the Al-Seidis shed all their contentiousness, for Al-Seidi is a keeper of accounts, while Johori is a forgiver of debts.**

**But the new name was not embraced by all. Some Al-Seidis held fast to their old name, seeing in Shoshem nothing but an opportunist craving power. It is possible for the mind to gaze at the rising sun of a new day and see only the consuming fires of hell, for the mind is made up of words, and words are made up of letters, and when letters combine in perverse ways, even the Land of Six Lights can become a Valley of Venomous Vipers.**

**Through Shoshem’s leadership, the Johoris broke free from the Amal-Kuf, and the Al-Seidis also attained their freedom. But the Johoris were those who learned the mystery**

of Letters, and the Al-Seidis were those who *did not*. For those who held fast to the name Al-Seidi, every freedom was only the beginning of a new form of slavery. Despite their freedom, they continued to tally credits and debits like petty wage earners. They hoped to become masters; they hoped to enslave the Amal-Kuf. They distrusted Shoshem. They rebelled against him. They charged him with crimes.

Shoshem stood for trial before the Al-Seidi high court. He pleaded his own defense. He addressed the entire court, but he also directed a personal appeal to its august presiding judge. He reviewed all that had transpired since the day, long before, when he had defeated the evil king. Then he beseeched the court to renounce the spirit of religious and cultural rivalry that had for so long divided them from him, and from everyone else. He spoke about God's unity, entreating the court with simple heartfelt words not often heard in the chambers of justice. "I pray you," Shoshem urged, "J'hoṇ is the gods; there is no other." "Listen!" he implored, "Al-Seidi is J'hoṇ. Our god — J'hoṇ — is *Universal*. He is the Faithful One, a reserve of kindness for His devotees. And what does J'hoṇ ask of you? Only your reverence and love." When Shoshem finished, he sang a short song and then blessed everyone.

The Al-Seidi high court convicted Shoshem, sentenced him to death, and the chief officer took him outside the gate and *killed him!*

Papa stopped. This part of the story always makes me so afraid, and I burrow deep under my feather quilt and hold Papa's hand. You, too, should hold Papa's hand. Papa's voice is comforting as he tells the sad end of the tale . . . .

After Shoshem died, the Amal-Kuf attacked once more. The Johoris sang God's praises and delighted in the Land of Six Lights, but the Al-Seidis were sorely defeated, their swords no match for the Amal-Kuf's projectile weapons of fire and ice. With the help of Shoshem, the Al-Seidis had managed to escape the Amal-Kuf's grip, but now the Al-Seidis were enslaved to the Amal-Kuf all over again. Again, they yearned

for a redeemer to come. Again, they gathered each week in groups to chant their woeful tale, intoned in mournful melody and meter.

“They were chanting the tale *you* wrote, Papa, isn’t that right? You’re the one who wrote their sad story, aren’t you, Papa?”

Yes, James, they gathered every week and chanted the same sad story I’m now reading to you. And all their souls were the living soul of the story. In the eternal telling of the story, they lived eternally; in the timelessness of the story, they overcame time; in the deathlessness of the story, they knew no death; and by them, the story was alive for all those who heard its words and dwelled amidst its letters.

From the darkness of their bitter servitude, the Al-Seidis would cry out to God, and God would always hear their cry, and a new redeemer would always come. He, too, would lead the Al-Seidis to freedom; but he, too, they would distrust; he, too, they would measure according to petty gains and losses;



he, too, they would denounce; and again and again, they would return to servitude beneath the repressive hand of the Amal-Kuf. And so it would continue.

King Shoshem was willing to die for them any number of times, for the last word of the story is always followed by its first word, and the story repeats itself, over and over, through the Circle Dance of Broken Time.

“Papa! What a sad, horrible, ugly tale you have written! *Is that the end?*” I always ask that question, but I know that it’s *not* the end. And Papa always answers . . . .

No, it's not the end, James. After suffering countless times, the Al-Seidis finally decided to cry out to the author of the tale in which they were living, pleading with him *to write a new ending*. You see, James, the Al-Seidis and the Johoris and the Amal-Kuf and the Land of Six Lights are all *here with us*, right now, in your bedroom, living out their story-world lives, and I think I just heard the Al-Seidis calling to us from the story world! In fact, I think I hear them calling *to you*, James. Yes, they're calling to *you*. Can you hear them? Listen carefully!

**“James, James! Help us! The letters! We're trapped in a prison made of letters! The story keeps being told, over and over, and the end is always the same: We betray our redeemer, and then we return to the hell of slavery! Help us, James! We're characters trapped in a book with a bad ending, and we can't get out!”**

Papa looks at me and smiles.

**Did you hear the Al-Seidis calling to you, James?**

“Yes, Papa.”

I love this part of the story. I squeeze Papa's hand tightly, and I smile back at him. Papa taught me that we are all prisoners of the stories we tell about ourselves, and Papa showed me the way to freedom.

I sit up in bed and close my eyes. I see the story world in my imagination, and I hear again the Al-Seidis crying for help: “*We're characters trapped in a book with a bad ending, and we can't get out!*”

I, James Haddington Campbell, draw in all my breath and shout back: “Papa wrote the story with a *hidden way out*. Change the *vowels*. Rearrange the *letters*. Then *walk to freedom!*”

Papa kisses my forehead, lays my head on the pillow, and tucks me in. “Papa,” I ask, “are *we* also characters in a story that someone somewhere has written?”

Papa smiles, squeezes my hand, and says: **“It's time for sleep, James.”** I hold his hand and slip into a happy slumber, dreaming of the Land of Six Lights and singing the song-prayers of the Johori people.

*"Mama, is that the end? Did James's papa ever answer his question?"*

*Yes, Anna, he answered it. The next day, when James awoke . . . .*

## Part II: The Author's Commentary

### I

For about six years, I've been attending, nearly every week, Jewish Sabbath services. I share many intimate moments with Jews who are socializing among other Jews, confiding with one another about the experience of being Jewish in a predominantly non-Jewish society, and I see ways in which Jews create their material and spiritual world (for better or for worse) by meditating on different aspects of Torah's story world. I also attend weekly talks at a Buddhist monastery on *motzei Shabbat* (i.e., Saturday night, after Sabbath).

Recently, we've had some sad events in the local area due primarily to anger over Israel's blockade of Gaza. A stone was thrown through the window of the local kosher bakery and graffiti were scrawled on the front of the "Holy Land" restaurant. It is very frightening to be hated by a phantom enemy due to one's ethnic origin and religious tradition.

Three weeks in a row, the rabbi at the synagogue talked about the ongoing problem of anti-Semitism and about the need to strengthen one's Jewish identity and Jewish community bonds as a source of emotional solace, physical survival, and (ultimately) spiritual salvation. Meanwhile, three weeks in a row, the monk at the Buddhist monastery talked about the eradication of the ego. "You are not the body," he said, "you are not even a person from such-and-such a place, with such-and-such a story; you are the *entire conscious creation*." The rabbi was hoping to reinforce Jewish identity in a world that reflects back bigotry; the monk was urging us to renounce not only national/ethnic identity, but also *individual* identity, in favor of perfect universalism. The rabbi spoke of anti-Semitism and civil rights; the monk spoke of selflessness and sacrifice. Each was meeting the spiritual needs of his congregation, but in such different ways.

It occurred to me how much *all of us*, not just Jews, create our reality through the stories we tell about ourselves. So I had an idea to write a story that would illustrate that idea.

There is a Hasidic teaching that says: If everyone's problems were hanging on separate hooks in a room, and we all entered the room, we would each go straight over to our own problems. We like them, you see, they are familiar to us, and they are what we are here in this world to do and ultimately to resolve. Moreover, we have no choice really. As I wrote in *The Great Escape*, someone else is the author of the stories we tell about ourselves; we only find ourselves dwelling in their midst. Recall what Moses said to God: "But now, if you will forgive their sin — but if not, blot me out please *from your Book that you are writing.*" (Exodus 32:32.) *God* wrote the Book, not us, and all the players on the world stage have their parts: The Jews are in there, the Moslems are in there, the Buddhists are in there, the Hindus are in there, and the Christians are in there. America is in there, Hitler is in there, and what I am doing today — well, that is also in there. It is all there in the Book.

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov said that he had a map and that is how he knew everything that had ever happened and everything that would ever happen in world history, and Nachman's map was of course the Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible). Bob Marley knew and loved the same "map," and he retold its story in "Redemption Song":

*How long shall they kill our prophets,  
While we stand aside and look? Oh!  
Some say it's just a part of it;  
We've got to fulfill the Book.*

—Bob Marley (1945-1981 C.E.)

"*We've got to fulfill the Book.*" So it is true what the Al-Seidis say in my little story. We're characters trapped in a book with a "bad" ending, and we can't get out. And each year when the last words of the Torah are read in synagogues all around the world ("*l'einei kal Yisrael*"), the first words are read immediately after ("*Bereishit bara Elohim*"), and around we go again. Ain't it fun?

A carousel ride in which the riders keep getting whacked in the face, over and over.

What a “bad” Book you wrote, God! But it is the *best of all books*, because God wrote a Book that has very few vowels and no punctuation marks, and what’s more, you can finagle its letters according to certain finagling rules that are all described in the Book itself. And therefore we must reconsider something I wrote above. I wrote: “[W]e have no choice really. . . . [S]omeone else is the author of the stories we tell about ourselves; we only find ourselves dwelling in their midst.” We *do* have choice! The Book is written, and we find ourselves dwelling in its midst, living out its painful twists of plot, but take another look at the Book! What is actually scrawled on the page? Just signs and symbols! The Book is written, but *we are the ones who can choose how to read it*. We choose what to make of the signs and symbols, and in so choosing, we can “walk to freedom” (as do the Johori people), or we can live the carousel ride from hell (as do the Al-Seidis).

It turns out, you see, that Torah’s story is much more beautiful and multidimensional than we ever knew, and God wrote into the Torah a hidden way out, a hidden way to climb off the “carousel ride from hell.”

Those were some of the ideas I was trying to develop in my little story — *The Great Escape*. It is not *my* story, of course. It is *Torah*. In writing my story, I was trying (in my poor way) to retell the story Torah tells, but in the form of an allegory. And, for me, the allegory is not merely about my Jewish brothers and sisters, for I see the Torah in much more universal terms than that. For me, “Al-Seidi” and “Johori” are not ethnic labels, but *attitudes of the heart*; they are not nations, but *states of mind*.

The key, then, to my story is a hermeneutical approach to the Torah, but for that, you have to know a little Hebrew, and you have to like word puzzles. Read this brief essay, and then consider how you fit into the Book that God wrote, and how, by rearranging its letters, you can unlock the gate of your prison and find your personal freedom. The first set of Tablets of the Law, the Tablets that Moses shattered, were “the work of the gods (*elohim*), and the

script was the script of the gods (*elohim*), *freedom on the Tablets.*” (Exodus 32:16, italics added.<sup>1</sup>)

II

As for the letter puzzle in my short story, here is the answer:

I picked the name Johori to suggest the common Arabic name *Johari*. I picked the name Al-Seidi to suggest the common Arabic name *Al-Saidi* (also *Al-Saadi*). The story relates, however, that Johori is *Yohori* in the language of the “southern lands.”

In Hebrew, an “r” (*reish*) looks almost exactly like a “d” (*dalet*):



Moreover, the letters “r” and “d” are sometimes interchanged in Hebrew scripture. (See Numbers 1:14 [Deuel] and 2:14 [Reuel]; Genesis 10:4 [Dodanim] and 1 Chronicles 1:7 [Rodanim].) The middle name of the boy in my story is spelled “Harrington” at the beginning of the story and “Haddington” at the end of the story. I wrote the name in two ways to signal the reader that the letters “r” and “d” are interchangeable. If one switches the “r” in *Yohori* (which is “Johori” in the language of the “southern lands”) with the “d” in *Al-Śeidi*, one gets the names *Yahodi* and *Al-Śeiri*.

The boy in the story (James) tells the characters: “Change the vowels. Rearrange the letters. Then walk to freedom!” If one changes the vowels in *Yahodi*, one gets *Yehudi*, which is Hebrew for “a person from Judea” (*i.e.*, the Southern Kingdom, led by the House of David/Judah). If one rearranges the letters in *Al-Śeiri*, one gets *Israeli*, which is Hebrew for “a person from Israel” (*i.e.*,

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<sup>1</sup> The words *CHaRuT AL Ha-LuCHoT* are usually translated “engraved on the Tablets,” but Torah is not written with vowels, and the words can be vowelized as *CHeiRuT AL Ha-LuCHoT*, which means “freedom on the tablets.”

the Northern Kingdom, led by the House of Joseph). On the division of David's kingdom into the Southern Kingdom and the Northern Kingdom, see the first Book of Kings, chapters 11 and 12.

Of course, the name *Al-Šeidi* is also a not-so-hidden rendering of *El Shaddai* (which is usually translated as “God Almighty” but is actually the proper name of a particular god — *Ba'al Haddad*). This correspondence is even closer in Hebrew, for in Hebrew *El Shaddai* is written *AL SHaDI*, and (given the interchangeability of the Hebrew letters “r” and “d”) *AL SHaDI* (*El Shaddai*) is a Hebrew anagram of *ISRaEL*. Because of this correspondence, the story says: “[T]he Al-Seidis are very proud of *their name* for God” (*i.e.*, their own name is one of God's names). Recall also that the angel that wrestles Jacob at the ford of Jabbok says to him, “You asked for my name” (Genesis 32:30), and the angel gives Jacob the name *Israel* (Genesis 32:29). The angel was *El Shaddai* (see 35:10-12), and Jacob “asked for” his name; he asked, in other words, *to receive* the angel's name (*Israel* equals *El Shaddai*).

Shoshem is, of course, Moses, the Avatar of Yahweh (Deuteronomy 29:5, 31:22-23) who is “King over Jeshurun” (another name for Israel) (Deuteronomy 33:5). As the story explains, Shoshem uses the name **J'hoṇ** for Johori so as to conceal the name, just as Moses used the name YHVH to conceal the name *Yehudi* (see page 27, below).

Beshat is *Boshet*, which is another name for the Canaanite god *Ba'al*. (Compare Judges, chs. 6-7 [*Jerub-Ba'al*] with 2 Samuel 11:21 [*Jerub-Boshet*]; compare 2 Samuel, chs. 2-4 [*Ish-Ba'al* and *Merib-Ba'al*] with 1 Chronicles, chs. 8-9 [*Ish-Boshet* and *Merib-Boshet*]; see also Jeremiah 3:24, 11:13; Hosea 9:10.) But the name BeSHaT (*i.e.*, *BoSHeT*) is also a Hebrew anagram of Sabbath (*i.e.*, *SHaBaT*), which (in Torah's usage) represents the seventh in any series.

Finally, Amal-Kuf is, of course, *Amalek*, the kingdom that, in different forms, perennially harasses the Israelites (in Hebrew, the last letter of “*Amalek*” is the letter *kuf*).

### III

But — you object — Moses was never martyred. The Moses of Torah is not a “Jesus figure” — not a martyred redeemer, suffering (like the “servant” of the Book of Isaiah, chapter 53) for the errors of the Israelite people.

But the fact is that in ancient times Judaism and Christianity were much closer to one another, theologically speaking, than they are today, and according to a venerable Jewish tradition, Moses *was* martyred. The *Zohar* (13<sup>th</sup> century C.E.), the most respected source of the Jewish mystical tradition, *states so explicitly*. But Torah’s power lies in its subtlety. To uncover Moses’ martyrdom in the Torah, the Torah has to be read with a good understanding of traditional Jewish hermeneutics.

According to Jewish tradition, Torah is scrambled to obscure its story, and every odd phrase or misspelled word is a clue — a signal connecting disparate parts of the story to one another. When one reads Torah with an understanding of traditional Jewish hermeneutics, the entire Book of Numbers tells, in code, the gripping and dramatic story of a bitter rebellion against Moses, culminating in his Jesus-like martyrdom. Moreover, the Book of Deuteronomy (minus the law code) represents Moses’ trial before “The Assembly” (a political body that governed the Israelites), and Moses’ final address is therefore *his defense at his trial*, one of the greatest speeches of all time, begging comparisons to the *Trial of Socrates*.

These are huge interpretive claims — *game-changing* claims. They use the Bible to shatter the divisive Christian dogma that the incarnation of Jesus was a *unique* event, rather than a *recurring* event (in circular time). They use the Bible to shatter the divisive Jewish dogma that the gospel of Jesus is a *perversion* of Torah, rather than the *core doctrine* of Torah. Yes, they are huge interpretive claims, but I can back them up.

### **Part III: The Martyrdom of Aaron and Moses**

#### **I**

The first important clue is the story of the “blasphemer.” Chapter 24 of the Book of Leviticus describes a mysterious episode of the Torah in which someone blasphemes YHVH and the law of the blasphemer is then announced. On a superficial level, the episode appears to be intended simply to provide a basis for promulgating the rule of law. But as with all things in the Torah, the story is much more than what appears on the surface. From the chiasmic structure of the text, we learn that the blasphemer’s capital offense was not simply blasphemy, but more specifically using the name YHVH to curse someone to die. Here are the relevant verses (Leviticus 24:15-23):

- (A) Any man that will blaspheme his God, he will bear his sin . . . .
- (B) Stranger and native alike . . . .
- (C) And a man that smites any human soul will surely die.
- (D) And the smiter of an animal soul will pay, soul for soul.
- (E) And a man that gives a wound in his people, as he did, so will be done to him.
- (F) Break for break,
- (G) Eye for eye,
- (F) Tooth for tooth.
- (E) As he gave a wound to man, so will be given to him.
- (D) And the smiter of an animal shall pay.
- (C) And the smiter of a man shall die. . . .
- (B) Stranger and native alike . . . .
- (A) And they took the blasphemer to the outside of the camp, and they stoned him . . . .

We begin with the first line. The complete line is as follows: “Any man that will blaspheme his God, he will bear his sin; and the blasphemer of the name YHVH will certainly die; the entire Assembly will certainly stone him.” According to ancient Jewish thought, blasphemy was any act that subtracted from the dignity of

the name of God, including pronouncing the name YHVH in a context (such as anger) that brought dishonor to the name. (See Leviticus 24:10-11.) The name YHVH is, according to the Jewish mystical tradition, the name associated with mercy and grace, but by using this name improperly, the blasphemer cuts himself off from grace, placing himself under the law of retribution (“he will bear his sin”). The remainder of the passage sets forth this law of strict, measure-for-measure justice — what in Eastern thought is called the “law of *karma*.”

The chiasmic structure of the text naturally focuses the reader on the pivot: “Eye for eye.” The symmetry of this “pivot” (*ayin tachat ayin*) is the key that unlocks the entire passage. As one moves in either direction away from the pivot, the lines repeat one another almost verbatim, like reflections in a mirror. Based on this chiasmic structure, the punishment line (the last line) necessarily reveals to us the undisclosed detail of the blasphemer’s crime (the first line). The last line states: “They took the blasphemer to the outside of the camp, *and they stoned him.*” (Italics added.) Therefore, the blasphemer of the first line must have used the name YHVH *to kill someone*.

Of course, the blasphemer may have had a good reason for committing this seemingly terrible crime; he or she might even have been a great prophet who acted for the sake of God. But even such a prophet — *especially* such a prophet — must still be willing to suffer the penalty of his actions. Otherwise, the moral foundation of the world is undermined.

Recall next what Moses did to Korach, who was the son of Izhar, Moses’ uncle (see Exodus 6:16-27), and who was one of the primary leaders of the Assembly. The Assembly was a political body that governed the Israelites. But the Assembly had grown frustrated with the leadership of Moses and Aaron, and it had chosen Korach — who aspired to be Chief Priest — to lead the people back to Egypt. (See Numbers 14:4; 16:1-34; Nehemiah 9:17.) Moses inquired of YHVH, and YHVH instructed Moses to “speak to the Assembly.” (Numbers 16:23.) But Moses did more; he invoked the name YHVH, angrily cursing Korach to die an unnatural death, and the ground then opened its “mouth” and

swallowed Korach alive. (Numbers 16:28-33.) Recall that blasphemy is pronouncing the name YHVH in a context (such as anger) that brings dishonor to the name. (Leviticus 24:10-11.) Now, recall the law of the blasphemer: “Any man that will blaspheme his God, he will bear his sin; and the blasphemer of the name YHVH will certainly die; the entire Assembly will certainly stone him.” (Leviticus 24:15-16.)

The blasphemer may have been a great prophet. . . . He or she may even have been the *greatest of the prophets*. He may even have been Moses *himself*, in which case he (Moses) must suffer the death penalty like anyone else.

Consider, in this context, Moses’ prophetic statement shortly after leaving Egypt: “Moses cried out to YHVH, saying, ‘What will I do for this people? *In a little while they will stone me!*’” (Exodus 17:4, italics added.) Every word of the Torah is true, and every utterance of a saint becomes manifest as an event in the world. (Deuteronomy 18:22.) Thus, Jacob’s rashly uttered words predicted Rachel’s death (see Genesis 31:32), and Moses’ rashly uttered words predicted his own death. YHVH does not contradict Moses when Moses says “in a little while they will stone me.” At the end of the Torah, *they do stone him*.

Significantly, the blasphemer story includes one of those delightfully ambiguous lines that make Torah so wonderful to read. The beginning of the incident is as follows: “The son of an Israelite woman — and he was the son of an Egyptian man — went out amidst the descendants of Israel; and the son of the Israelite [woman] and an Israelite man fought in the camp, and the son of the Israelite woman pronounced the name [YHVH], and he blasphemed, and they brought him to Moses, and the name of his mother was Shelomit daughter of Divri of the tribe of Dan.” (Leviticus 24:10-11.)

The story fits perfectly when read as a description of the confrontation between Moses and Korach, in which Moses pronounced the name and angrily cursed Korach to die. The statement that the blasphemer (*i.e.*, Moses) was brought “to Moses” is a formalism. The meaning is that Moses was brought to be judged, and Moses, who was the high judge (Exodus 18:13-26),

pronounced his own sentence according to the law that he had taught the community. Moses' own law was a witness against him.

But there is another ambiguity. The story states that "the name of *his* mother was Shelomit daughter of Divri of the tribe of Dan." (Exodus 24:11, italics added.) But who is the antecedent of "his"? The placement of the line misleads the reader to think that the *blasphemer* is the antecedent of "his" (i.e., the *blasphemer's* mother was Shelomit).

Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (Rashi) (11<sup>th</sup> century C.E.), Torah's premier commentator, adopts this reading of the text. He argues that this Israelite woman was the wife of the Hebrew slave that Moses defended when, as a young prince of Egypt, he encountered an Egyptian overseer striking a Hebrew slave. (See Exodus 2:11-12.) Rashi implies that this woman (the wife of the rescued Hebrew slave) was formerly raped by the Egyptian overseer, and that the offspring of that rape was the "son of an Egyptian man" who later "fought in the camp" and blasphemed. (Leviticus 24:10.)

But the text can also be read to say that *the "Israelite man" who fought with the blasphemer* is the antecedent of "his" (i.e., Shelomit was the mother of the blasphemer's *opponent*). The latter reading is highly evocative because *the name Shelomit was an alternative name for Korach* (see 1 Chronicles 23:18), and in Torah children are sometimes given the name of a parent.<sup>2</sup> Thus, by saying that "the name of his mother was Shelomit," the text is hinting that the "Israelite man" who fought the blasphemer was *Korach*.

Again, it appears that the blasphemer incident and the Korach incident are really describing the same event, and the blasphemer who fought the Israelite man was none other than Moses. If so,

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Jethro, who was Moses' father in law and also the father of the Moabite king Balak (see *Zohar* 196b-197a, translated in Harry Sperling and Maurice Simon, *The Zohar: An English Translation*, vol. v (Soncino 1984), p. 282, explicating Numbers 22:4) is called Zippor, and his daughter is called Zipporah (Exodus 2:21, 18:2).

then the lines in the Book of Leviticus describing the blasphemer's execution by stoning are relating the story of *Moses*' death.

II

Significantly, the *Zohar* confirms that Moses was martyred, and in doing so the *Zohar* explains the phrase "son of an Egyptian man" that appears in the blasphemer story. At a certain point in the *Zohar*'s story, two of its personalities, Rabbi Abba and Rabbi El'azar, are traveling together, and they meet a "donkey driver" (an Arab caravanner who turns out to be the reincarnation of Rav Hamnuna Sava). The "donkey driver" expounds the following biblical verses, which describe Benayahu, a close adviser to both David and Solomon:

And Benayahu the son of Yehoyada, the son of a living man, of *Kavtz'el*, abundant [in] acts, he struck down two altar-stones [*ariel*] of Moab, and he went down and slew the lion in the midst of a well in a day of snow. And he slew an Egyptian man, a man of [good] appearance, and in the hand of the Egyptian [was] a spear, and he descended upon him with a staff and plucked the spear out of the hand of the Egyptian and killed him with his [own] spear. Benayahu the son of Yehoyada did these things, and to him [was] name among the three mighty men. From the thirty he was honored, but to the three he did not come. And [King] David set him to his bidding.<sup>3</sup>

The donkey driver of the *Zohar*'s narrative relates these enigmatic verses about Benayahu to the death of Moses, relying on the fact that "Egyptian man" is Hebrew scripture's code moniker for Moses:

*He* [Benayahu son of Yehoyada] *slew an Egyptian, a man of good appearance* [citation to 2 Samuel]. Here the mystery of the verse discloses that whenever Israel sinned [an aspect of God] departed, withholding from them all

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<sup>3</sup> 2 Samuel 23:20-23; see also 1 Chronicles 11:22-24.

goodness, all the light illumining them. *He slew an Egyptian man* — the light of that light illuminating Israel. Who is it? Moses, as it is written: *They said, 'An Egyptian man rescued us'* (Exodus 2:19). There [in Egypt] he [Moses] was born, there he was raised, there he rose to the highest light. . . . *Man*, as is said: *Man of Elohim* (Deuteronomy 33:1) — husband as it were, of that *mar'eh*, appearance, [husband] of the Presence of YHVH, for he was worthy of conducting this [spiritual] rung on earth in any way he wished — something no other human attained. [¶] *The Egyptian man had a spear in his hand* [citation to 2 Samuel]. . . . With this he sinned at the rock, as is said: *He struck the rock with his staff twice* (Numbers 20:11). The Blessed Holy One said to him, “Moses, I did not give you My staff for this. By your life! From now on, it will no longer be in your hand.” Immediately *He went down to him with a club* [citation to 2 Samuel] — with severe judgment. *And wrenched the spear out of the Egyptian's hand*, for from that moment it was withheld from him and was never again in his hand. *And killed him with his own spear*. Because of the sin of striking [the rock] with that staff, he died and did not enter the Holy Land, and his light was withheld from Israel.<sup>4</sup>

Some readers might say that the explication given here is even more obscure than the biblical verses it purports to elucidate, but what is clear in this *Zohar* passage is that “Benayahu the Israelite” is interpreted to be Moses’ executioner, who is exercising God’s judgment against Moses after Moses used his staff to strike “the rock.”

As noted, the *Zohar* passage discloses Torah’s encoded way of referring to Moses. Based on the incident in Moses’ life when Moses flees Egypt, encounters seven sisters at a well, rescues the

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<sup>4</sup> *Zohar* 1:6b, translated in Daniel C. Matt, *The Zohar* (Pritzker Edition), vol. 1 (Stanford Univ. Press 2004), pp. 41-42.

sisters, and then the sisters report to their father that “an Egyptian man saved us” (see Exodus 2:15-19), the *Zohar* explains that, throughout Hebrew scripture, “Egyptian man” should be read as a signal indicating that Moses is the person under discussion. This point is highly significant because, in the blasphemer incident in chapter 24 of the Book of Leviticus, the blasphemer is described as the “son of an Egyptian man.” (Leviticus 24:10.) The words “son of” are not important for present purposes (for surely an Egyptian man is also *the son of* an Egyptian man). The significant signal is the phrase “Egyptian man,” indicating unambiguously to the thoughtful reader of Torah that Moses is the person under discussion.

But, we might ask, which character in Torah is being referred to here as “Benayahu”? and Why does the passage describe Moses’ crime (for which he suffered the death penalty) as the incident in which he struck a rock and miraculously produced water for the thirsty Israelites (see Numbers, ch. 20)? Has it not been the thesis of this essay that Moses was “the blasphemer” described in chapter 24 of the Book of Leviticus, that his blasphemy is related in more detail in the contention with Korach (see Numbers, ch. 16), and that he suffered the death penalty for this act of blasphemy, not for striking the rock?

The answer lies in the possibility that the Korach incident at “Kadeish” (Numbers, 13:26) and the striking-of-the-rock incident at the “Waters of Contention” (Numbers 20:13) are two descriptions of a *single incident*.

Commentators have long wondered about the sin at the rock (Numbers 20:1-13) that caused YHVH to decree the deaths of both Aaron (Numbers 20:23-24) and Moses (Numbers 27:12-14; Deuteronomy 32:48-51). God told Moses that he and Aaron should “*speak* to the rock” to obtain “its waters,” but instead Moses “*struck* the rock with his staff twice” and obtained “abundant waters.” (Numbers 20:1-13, italics added.) There must be more to the story than appears on the surface. Certainly, Aaron and Moses were disobedient, but their disobedience hardly seems to merit the death penalty. Commentators have suggested many creative explanations for why Moses’ minor act of disobedience

called for his death: (1) Moses was such an advanced soul that he was held to a higher moral standard than an ordinary person; (2) his error was not his act of disobedience but rather the anger he exhibited when he called the Israelites “rebels”; (3) he missed an opportunity to perform a miracle by mere word of mouth, rather than by a physical act, and the former would have so awed the Israelites that they would have followed him faithfully. None of these explanations wholly satisfies; the episode remains mysterious.

But the secret lies in the statement: “Moses *raised his hand*, and he struck the rock with his staff twice.” (Numbers 20:11, italics added.) The expression “raised his hand” must be read in conjunction with the law set forth in the Book of Numbers: “A soul that has acted with *a raised hand*, . . . he has blasphemed YHVH.” (Numbers 15:30.) But how does raising one’s hand blaspheme YHVH?

### III

In the Hebrew of the Torah, which is written without vowels, the word for “hand” (*yad*) and the word for the Hebrew letter *yud* (Y) are written the same way. Hence, the phrase “A soul that has acted with *a raised hand*” (Numbers 15:30) can be translated “A soul that has acted with *a raised [letter] yud*.” This alternative translation makes no sense until one considers that God’s name, YHVH, contains a hidden letter *yud* (Y) tucked into the bottom of the final letter. The final letter of the name is a *hei* (H), but a *hei* is drawn by combining a *dalet* (D) and a *yud* (Y) to make a single letter. Hence, by “rais[ing] the *yud*,” the final *hei* (H) of the name becomes a *dalet-yud* (DY), and God’s name is revealed to be *Yehudi* (which means “Judean” or “Jew”):

*And Yahweh Spoke to Moses in the Wilderness*



*hei*      *vov*      *hei*      *yud*  
 H      V      H      Y

←←←←direction of reading←←←←

*The Name YHVH*



*yud*      *dalet*      *vov*      *hei*      *yud*  
 Y      D      V      H      Y

←←←←direction of reading←←←←

*The yud has been broken out of the second hei,  
 making the hei into a dalet.*



*yud*      *dalet*      *vov*      *hei*      *yud*  
 Y      D      V      H      Y

←←←←←direction of reading←←←←←

*The yud has been repositioned at the top,  
 to produce the name Yehudi.*

When Torah tells us that “Moses *raised his hand*, and he struck the rock with his staff twice” (Numbers 20:11, italics added), it is really telling us that Moses raised the letter *yud*, revealing the secret name *Yehudi*. And he did so in a way that

brought dishonor to the name. First, he angrily called the congregation “rebels” (Numbers 20:10), and then he pronounced the name, using it to “strike” the “rock” (*sela*) twice. And YHVH tells us (through the mouth of the prophet): “My Word [*i.e.*, My Name] is like fire . . . and like a hammer that explodes a rock (*sela*).” (Jeremiah 23:29.)

The Hebrew word for “and he struck” (*vayakh*) is typically used in Torah to describe the act of inflicting death, and the word “twice” (*pa’amaim*) could also be translated “a second time.” Once before, Moses “struck” (inflicted death upon) a “rock” (*tzur*) (Exodus 17:1-7), but he did so then with YHVH’s permission and there was no mention of punishment, but here he inflicts death a second time upon a “rock” (*sela*), and he acts this time on his own initiative, and YHVH decrees *Moses’* death. We begin to wonder if, in each case, the “rock” is not perhaps *a person*.

The Hebrew word used for the first rock is *tzur*. The word *tzur* refers to “a broad, elevated, unmovable rock” or “a rock mountain,” but *Tzur* is also *a personal name* in Torah; it is the alternative name of Balak, the prince of Midian who became king over the Moabites (Numbers 31:8<sup>5</sup>) and whom Moses eventually “struck” down (Joshua 13:21).

The Hebrew word used for the second rock is *sela*. The word *sela* refers to “a bald, protruding rock formation.” Significantly, the name Korach translates as “bald.”

Was perhaps the first “rock” (*tzur*) that Moses struck a reference to Balak, and was then the second “rock” (*sela*) that Moses struck a reference to Korach? In the Book of Isaiah, we read: “A man was . . . like a shadow, a heavy rock (*sela*) in a land of thirst” (Isaiah 32:2), and Ali ibn Abi Talib (the successor to the prophet Muhammad) said: “An ignorant man is a rock from which no water flows” (J.A. Chapman, *Maxims of Ali* (1963), p. 25).

What then can we say of the mysterious striking-of-the-rock incident that occurred at the Waters of Contention? It appears to

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<sup>5</sup> On the assertion that Tzur (the prince of Midian) is the same as Balak (the son of Jethro and king of Moab), see Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, vol. III (Johns Hopkins Univ. Press 1998), p. 353.

be best read as a *reiteration* of the Korach incident that occurred at Kadeish, which itself is a reiteration of the blasphemer passage from chapter 24 of the Book of Leviticus.

Moses blasphemed the name YHVH (Leviticus, ch. 24); Moses used the name YHVH to curse Korach to die (Numbers, ch. 16); Moses raised the hidden *yud* of the name YHVH to angrily strike down Korach the “Rock” (Numbers, ch. 20); and the punishment was death: “And YHVH said to Moses: ‘Ascend to this mountain of the Hebrews . . . , and you shall be gathered to your people [*i.e.*, you shall die] . . . because you defied [the word of] my mouth in the wilderness of Tzin, in the strife of the Assembly, [failing] to cause me to be sanctified in waters before their eyes; they are the Waters of Contention, Kadeish, wilderness of Tzin.’” (Numbers 27:12-14.)

But Moses certainly acted for the sake of God. Korach wanted to return the Israelites to Egypt, and he was the leader of an angry rebellion against Moses. Moses (by the spirit of prophecy) foresaw that a return to Egypt would be disastrous and that he could prevent Korach’s rebellion only by striking down Korach. And Moses also foresaw that Korach would be reborn among his own descendants and that the descendants of Korach would be some of the greatest seers of Judaism. Moses foresaw all this, and he acted. He blasphemed. He “struck the rock.” He uttered the name YHVH in its revealed form, cursing Korach to die an unnatural death. Significantly, Moses’ sin at the rock is retold in the Book of Psalms, but in the retelling *Moses’ blasphemy is made explicit*: “They provoked at the Waters of Contention, and it was bad for Moses because of them, for they defied his spirit, *and he pronounced [the secret name] with his lips.*” (Psalms 106:32-33.) In other words, he uttered a blasphemous curse that brought down Korach to the grave.

#### IV

Classical Jewish hermeneutics recognizes the principle of *gezerah shavah* (“decree of equivalence”) for interpreting the Torah. Under this widely accepted Talmudic principle, the rabbis find a link between disparate passages of Torah based on the words or expressions the passages use in common. Consider in light of

*gezerah shavah* the following chart, which places the story of Korach’s rebellion side by side against the story of Moses’ striking of the rock, pointing out the literary clues that link the stories to one another. The two columns on the left can be read vertically, but the chart should also be read horizontally to reveal the connections between the texts. According to the principle of *gezerah shavah*, the common words and expressions in these stories indicate that the two stories are really one.

<b><u>Korach’s Ill-fated Rebellion</u></b>	<b><u>Striking the Rock (Moses’ Sin)</u></b>	<b><u>Decoding the Torah</u></b>
<p><i>Korach led a group of “<b><u>rebels</u></b>” (Numbers 17:25) against the leadership of Moses and Aaron. . . .</i></p> <p>And Korach . . . and Dathan and Abiram . . . and On . . . took, and they rose before Moses and the men of the descendants of Israel — 250 leaders of the Assembly, those summoned to the Meeting, men of name. <b><u>They convened against Moses and against Aaron,</u></b></p>	<p><i>A group of “<b><u>rebels</u></b>” (Numbers 20:10) rose up against the leadership of Moses and Aaron. . . .</i></p> <p>And the descendants of Israel and the entire Assembly came to the wilderness of Tzin in the first month, and the people resided in Kadeish, and Miriam died there, and she was buried there, and there was no water for the Assembly, and <b><u>they convened against Moses and against Aaron.</u></b> (Numbers 20:1-2)</p>	

and they said to them: “. . . Why do you raise yourselves above the congregation of YHVH?”  
(Number 16:1-3)

*YHVH’s advice was to speak to the rebels, urging them to disperse. . . .*

YHVH spoke to Moses, saying: “Speak to the Assembly, saying, ‘Ascend from around the dwelling place of Korach, Dathan, and Abiram.’ ”  
(Numbers 16:23-24)

*But Moses and Aaron did not just speak to Korach’s Assembly; Moses cursed Korach, using the secret name of God. . . .*

*YHVH’s advice was to speak to the Rock, causing it to give forth its water. . . .*

And YHVH spoke to Moses saying: “Take the staff and convene the Assembly — you and Aaron your brother — and you shall speak to the Rock before their eyes, and it will give its water, and you shall bring forth for them water from a Rock . . . .”  
(Numbers 20:7-8)

*But Moses and Aaron did not just speak to the Rock; Moses raised his hand and struck the rock. . . .*



Photo © Pierre Richer

**An ignorant man is a Rock** from which no water flows.  
(Ali ibn Abi Talib — successor to the prophet Mohammed)

**A man was** . . . like a shadow, **a heavy Rock** in a land of thirst.  
(Isaiah 32:2)

A soul that has acted with a **raised hand** . . . he has **blasphemed**

<p>And Moses said: “If YHVH creates a new creation and the soil opens its mouth and swallows them and all that is theirs and they descend alive to the netherworld, then you will know that these men provoked YHVH.” And it was, when he finished speaking all these words, the soil that was beneath them split, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them . . . , and they . . . descended alive to the netherworld . . . . (Numbers 16:30-33)</p> <p><i>The Assembly convenes and indicts Moses and Aaron for murder.</i></p> <p>And the entire</p>	<p>And Moses took <b><u>the staff</u></b> from before YHVH, as he commanded him, and Moses and Aaron convened the congregation before the face of the Rock, and he said to them: “Listen, please, rebels. Out of this Rock we shall bring for you water.” And Moses <b><u>raised his hand</u></b> . . .</p> <p>. . . and he struck the <b><u>Rock</u></b> with his staff twice, and he brought forth abundant water . . . . (Numbers 20:9-11)</p> <p>These are the <b><u>Waters of Contention</u></b> . . . .” (Numbers 20:13)</p>	<p><b><u>YHVH</u></b>. (Numbers 15:30)</p> <p><i>This same <b><u>staff</u></b> Moses used to strike the Nile; it bore the letters of God’s name. (Targum Yerushalmi, to Exodus 2:21)</i></p> <p>A soul that has acted with a <b><u>raised hand</u></b>, . . . he has <b><u>blasphemed YHVH</u></b>. (Numbers 15:30)</p> <p><b><u>My Word</u></b> is like fire — the testimony of YHVH — and like a hammer that <b><u>explodes a rock</u></b>. (Jeremiah 23:29.)</p> <p>They provoked at the <b><u>Waters of Contention</u></b>, and it was bad for Moses because of them, for they defied his spirit,</p>
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<p>Assembly of the descendants of Israel indicted Moses and Aaron the next day, saying: “You caused the people of YHVH to die.” (Numbers 17:6)</p> <p><i>The punishment for murder is <b>death</b> (Leviticus 24:17, 21).</i></p> <p>The one that spills the blood of man, <b><u>by man his blood will be spilled.</u></b> (Genesis 9:6.)</p> <p>Any man that will blaspheme his God, he will bear his sin. . . . And a man that smites any human soul <b><u>will surely die.</u></b> . . . Break for break, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. . . .</p>	<p><i>And YHVH declared a harsh punishment that included <b>death</b> (Deuteronomy 32:50).</i></p> <p>And YHVH said to Moses and to Aaron . . . , saying: “<b><u>Aaron shall be gathered to his people,</u></b> for he shall not come to the land . . . , because you <b><u>defied [the word of] my mouth</u></b> at the <b><u>Waters of Contention.</u></b>” (Numbers 20:23-24)</p> <p>And YHVH said to Moses: “Ascend to this mountain of the Hebrews . . . , and <b><u>you shall be gathered to your people</u></b> — also you — just as Aaron your brother was gathered, because you <b><u>defied [the word of] my mouth</u></b> in the wilderness of Tzin, in</p>	<p>and <b><u>he pronounced [the secret name] with his lips.</u></b> (Psalms 106:32-33)</p> <p>They provoked at the <b><u>Waters of Contention,</u></b> and it was bad for Moses because of them . . .</p> <p>. . . for they <b><u>defied</u></b> his spirit, and <b><u>he pronounced [the</u></b></p>
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<p>... And the one that smites a man shall <b>die</b>. . . . (Leviticus 24:15-21)</p> <p>A soul that has acted with a raised hand, . . . he has blasphemed YHVH, . . . his iniquity is upon him. . . . (Numbers 15:30-31)</p>	<p>the strife of the Assembly, [failing] to cause me to be sanctified in waters before their eyes; they are the <b><u>Waters of Contention</u></b>, Kadeish, wilderness of Tzin.” (Numbers 27:12-14)</p> <p>And YHVH spoke to Moses in the bone of that day saying: “Ascend to this mountain of the Hebrews, Mount Nebo, that is in the land of Moab . . . , <b>and die</b> at the mountain that you will ascend there, and be gathered to your people, in the same way as Aaron your brother <b>died</b> at Mount Hor and he was gathered to his people, because you <b>defied me</b> amidst the descendants of Israel, at the <b><u>Waters of Contention</u></b>, Kadeish, wilderness of Tzin, because you did not sanctify me among the descendants of Israel.” (Deuteronomy 32:48-51)</p>	<p><b><u>secret name]</u></b> <b><u>with his lips.</u></b> (Psalms 106:32-33)</p> <p>They provoked at the <b><u>Waters of Contention</u></b>, and it was bad for Moses because of them, for they defied his spirit, and <b>he</b> <b><u>pronounced [the secret name]</u></b> <b><u>with his lips.</u></b> (Psalms 106:32-33)</p> <p>They provoked at the <b><u>Waters of Contention</u></b>, and it was bad for Moses because of them, for they <b>defied</b> his spirit, and <b>he</b> <b><u>pronounced [the secret name]</u></b> <b><u>with his lips.</u></b> (Psalms 106:32-33)</p>
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Moses acted for the sake of God, but nevertheless he needed to suffer the punishment, which was his own death. And what of Aaron, the Chief Priest? Was not Aaron fully complicit in Moses' actions? Did he not stand loyally by Moses and silently participate in the blasphemous curse that brought about Korach's death? (See Numbers 16:18-35.) And did not YHVH tell Moses *only to speak* to Korach and the rest of the Assembly? (See Numbers 16:23-24.) Likewise, did not Aaron stand loyally by Moses and silently participate when Moses "raised his hand" and struck the "rock"? (See Numbers 20:9-11.) And did not YHVH tell Moses *only to speak* to the "rock"? (See Numbers 20:8.) Certainly, Aaron was an accomplice to Moses' criminal offense, and therefore Aaron, too, was charged with murder, and Aaron, too, was held subject to the death penalty.

"And they found a man gathering *eitzim* ('logs') on the Sabbath day." (Numbers 15:32.) The law is clear: "You will not kindle fire in any of your dwellings on the Sabbath day." (Exodus 35:3.) Who therefore could they have found gathering *eitzim* ("logs") on the Sabbath? *Who is the only person who would be likely to be gathering logs on that day?* It was Aaron, the Chief Priest, of course, *whose duty it was to kindle the altar fire every morning, including the Sabbath morning.* In the Book of Leviticus we read: "And the fire on the altar, it shall burn upon it, *it will not be extinguished*, the priest [*i.e.*, Aaron] will burn upon it *eitzim* ('logs') *every morning . . .*" (Leviticus 6:5, italics added.) Only Aaron would be found "gathering logs" on the Sabbath day.<sup>6</sup>

And what became of the "man gathering logs" (*i.e.*, Aaron, the Chief Priest)? "The entire Assembly drew him out to the outside of the camp, and they[, acting through an agent,] stoned him with

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<sup>6</sup> There are of course other theories regarding who the "man gathering logs" may have been. The Babylonian Talmud (*Shabbat* 96b-97a) records the assertion of Rabbi Akiva (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries C.E.) that the man was Tzelophchad (who is described in Numbers 26:33, 27:1-11) and also the competing assertion that he was one of the group that ascended "the mountain" after being warned not to do so (Numbers 14:40-45).

stones, and he died, according to that which YHVH had commanded Moses.” (Numbers 15:36.) Does God decree the death penalty merely for gathering logs on the Sabbath day? The Sabbath signifies the seventh in any series, and it reveals God’s aspect as earthly sovereign. To honor the Sabbath is to honor God in a very great way, but are we to believe that the honor due to the Sabbath demands the death penalty for those who pick up sticks? (Cf. Exodus 31:14-15.)

The man found gathering logs on the Sabbath was stoned, *but not for the act of gathering logs*. He was stoned for being an accomplice to Moses when Moses blasphemously cursed Korach to die. The statement that he was found gathering logs is *merely descriptive*; it identifies the person (*i.e.*, Aaron) in a discreet way, concealing his name. It is misread to be a description of the crime for which the man was punished. Consider the full text of the passage:

A soul that has acted with a raised [letter] *yud*, . . . he has blasphemed YHVH, and that soul will be cut off from among its people, for he scorned the word YHVH and nullified His commandment. That soul will surely be cut off; *his sin is upon him*. And the descendants of Israel were in the wilderness, and they found a man gathering *eitzim* (“logs”) on the Sabbath day [*i.e.*, Aaron, the Chief Priest]. And the ones who found him gathering logs brought him close to Moses and to Aaron and to the entire Assembly, and they put him under guard for it was not clear what [to] do to him. And YHVH said to Moses, the man will surely die, all the Assembly will stone him with stones outside the camp. And the entire Assembly led him to the outside of the camp, and they stoned him with stones, and he died as YHVH commanded to Moses.<sup>7</sup>

Read in its entirety, it becomes clear that the man is stoned for blaspheming YHVH. The phrase “his sin is upon him” indicates

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<sup>7</sup> Numbers 15:30-36, italics added.

that the punishment must fit the crime, which informs us that here, where the punishment is death, the crime was using the name YHVH to curse someone to die. The statement that the man (*i.e.*, Aaron) was brought “to Moses and to Aaron and to the entire Assembly” is again a formalism, like the statement previously discussed that *the blasphemer* (*i.e.*, Moses) was brought “to Moses.” The meaning here is that Aaron was brought before the highest judicial body of the community, of which Aaron was an *ex officio* member. The statement that “they [*i.e.*, the entire Assembly] stoned him with stones” is also misleading. Rashi explains that the Assembly always acted in a corporate capacity, through an agent, when it would inflict death by stoning.<sup>8</sup>

And Torah later gives more details about Aaron’s punishment. To Moses and Aaron, YHVH says: “Aaron shall be gathered to his people, for he shall not come to the land . . . , because you (plural) defied [the word of] my mouth at the Waters of Contention.” (Numbers 20:24.) And later, Torah says: “They ascended to Mount Hor before the eyes of the entire Assembly, and Moses stripped Aaron of his garments, and he dressed with them Elazar his son, and Aaron died there at the head of the mountain, and Moses and Elazar descended from the mountain.” (Numbers 20:27-28.) Finally, Torah says: “And Aaron the priest ascended to Mount Hor by the mouth of YHVH, and he died there . . . .” (Numbers 33:38.) The last quote explains that Aaron died “by the mouth of YHVH,” and according to a very old tradition, this expression is a euphemism for martyrdom.<sup>9</sup>

And Moses’ own death is described in similar terms: “Ascend to this mountain of the Hebrews . . . , and you shall be gathered to your people — also you — just as Aaron your brother was gathered, because you (plural) defied [the word of] my mouth in the wilderness of Tzin, in the strife of the Assembly, [failing] to cause me to be sanctified in waters before their eyes; they are the

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<sup>8</sup> Rashi on Leviticus 24:14, translated in *Rashi: Commentary on the Torah (The Sapirstein Edition)*, vol. 3 (Mesorah Publications 1999), p. 313.

<sup>9</sup> See Michael Fishbane, *The Kiss of God: Spiritual and Mystical Death in Judaism* (Univ. of Washington Press 1994), pp. 51-52, 82, 84-86.

Waters of Contention, Kadeish, wilderness of Tzin.” (Number 27:12-14; see also Deuteronomy 32:49-51.) “And Moses ascended from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, head of the promontory that is on the face of Jericho . . . , and Moses, servant of YHVH, died there in the land of Moab, *by the mouth of YHVH*. And he entombed him in the valley, in the land of Moab, across from the Temple of Peor, and no man knows his tomb until this day. . . . And Joshua son of Nun was filled with the spirit of Wisdom . . . .” (Deuteronomy 34:1-9, italics added.)

The phrase “by the mouth of YHVH,” as noted, indicates martyrdom, but what about the statement “he entombed him”? Who entombed him? With only the use of the third person singular, Torah signals that someone else was present when Moses died. But who? A pious tradition relates that YHVH was present, and that YHVH buried Moses. But pious traditions are sometimes created to obscure painful memories. Even if YHVH buried him, someone had to lift the stone that took Moses’ life and someone had to dig the pit that received his body.

Both Aaron and Moses were tried by the Assembly and suffered a martyr’s death. Scripture says of the Israelites: “They rebelled against You [*i.e.*, YHVH] . . . . *They killed Your prophets . . . .*” (Nehemiah 9:26, italics added.) And, as mentioned, Rashi teaches in regard to stoning that the Assembly acted corporately, through an agent who executed the punishment on its behalf. And who was the head of the Assembly at the time Moses died? Joshua son of Nun, from the tribe of Ephraim. (Numbers 13:16, 27:15-23.) “By a prophet, YHVH brought Israel up from Egypt, and by a prophet they were guarded. *Ephraim has angered bitterly*, and his blood will be spread upon him . . . .” (Hosea 12:14-15, italics added.)

## VI

Who killed poor Moses?  
Goethe supposes  
That the terrible son  
Of a masculine Nun,  
And Caleb his crony,

Whose sire is Jephone,  
Together killed Moses;  
So Goethe supposes!

—James Thomson (1834-1882 C.E.)<sup>10</sup>

As a pious young man, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832 C.E.) endeavored to sanctify himself in imitation of the Patriarchs. He learned Hebrew and studied the Torah closely. He concluded that Joshua son of Nun, acting with the help of his friend Caleb son of Jephunneh, killed Moses, and Goethe recorded his theory in his essay “Israel in der Wüste.”<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Goethe is not the only student of the Hebrew Bible to have had this thought. Sigmund Freud famously advocated his own version of the theory that the Israelites killed Moses in the wilderness.<sup>12</sup> But more important is the leading Persian historian, Abu Ja’far Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari (839-923 C.E.). The latter is known for his *Tarikh al-Tabari* (“*History of Prophets and Kings*”), in which he writes:

When Moses returned to the Children of Israel without Aaron, they said that Moses had killed Aaron, because he had envied their love for him, for Aaron was more forbearing and more lenient with them, while Moses had a certain harshness toward them. . . . Moses . . . prayed to God, Who made the bed descend so that they could see it between heaven and earth, and then they believed Moses. [¶] Then, while Moses was walking with his servant Joshua, a black wind suddenly approached. When Joshua saw it, . . . [h]e clung to Moses and said, “The hour is appearing while I cling to Moses, the prophet of God.” But Moses withdrew himself gently from under his

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<sup>10</sup> James Thomson, *The City of Dreadful Night*, vol. I (Reeves & Turner 1895), p. 296.

<sup>11</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Goethe's Werke: Vollständige Ausgabe Letzter Hand*, vol. 6 (JG Cotta'sche Buchhandlung 1827), p. 172.

<sup>12</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* (Vintage Books 1967).

shirt, leaving it in Joshua's hand. When Joshua returned with the shirt, the Israelites seized him, saying, "You have killed the prophet of God!" . . . He said, "If you do not believe me, give me a delay of three days." Then he prayed to God, and every man who was guarding him was approached in a dream and informed that Joshua had not killed Moses; rather, "We have raised him up to Us," and they left him alone.<sup>13</sup>

Here, Moses is accused of killing Aaron, and Joshua of killing Moses, and in both cases, mystical intervention operates to allay the suspicion. When we consider that Joshua next proceeded to split the Jordan River (see Joshua 3:9-17), al-Tabari's description of Moses' death is seen to be strikingly similar to the death of Elijah:

And Elisha said: "And may it be, please, that twofold your spirit [comes] to me." And [Elijah] said: ". . . if you see me taken from you, it will be so for you . . ." . . . And — behold — a rider of fire and horses of fire [appeared] and separated between the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a storm to the heavens. And Elisha saw, and he cried out: "My Father! My Father! The Rider of Israel and its Horsemen!" And he did not see him anymore. . . . And he raised the cloak of Elijah that had fallen from upon him, and he returned, and he stood upon the bank of the Jordan. And he took the cloak of Elijah that had fallen from upon him, and he struck the waters, and he said: "Where is YHVH, God of Elijah?" Even he — and he struck the waters, and it split, hither and yon, and Elisha crossed.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> William M. Brinner (translator), *The History of al-Tabari*, vol. III, *The Children of Israel* (SUNY 1987), p. 86.

<sup>14</sup> 2 Kings 2:9-14.

Clearly, according to al-Tabari's history, Elijah's death is a reenactment of Moses' death. Moreover, al-Tabari's text resolves the mystery of who was present at Moses' death and who buried him. Joshua son of Nun was present, and he was left grasping Moses' shirt in his hand, just as Joseph's brothers were left grasping Joseph's striped tunic (Genesis 37:3, 31-33), and just as Potiphar's wife was left grasping Joseph's garment (Genesis 39:12), and just as Elisha was left grasping Elijah's cloak (2 Kings 2:13). The bit of cloth betokens the deed.

## VII

Joshua the son of Nun is called "lad" (*na'ar*) in the Torah. (Exodus 33:11.) According to the Jewish mystical tradition, "lad" (*na'ar*) is a signifier of Metatron, who lived on earth as Enoch (Genesis 5:24) and who is the highest among the angels. The Babylonian Talmud teaches (*Sanhedrin* 38b) that Metatron is the angel about whom YHVH says: "Behold, I send an angel before you . . . ; beware of him and heed his voice . . . for he will not forgive your transgressions for my Name is in him." (Exodus 23:20-21; see also Exodus 33:2-3.) The letters of YHVH (*yud-hei-vov-hei*) are, of course, in Joshua's name (*yud-hei-vov-shin-ayin*). By calling Joshua "lad," the Torah links Joshua to Metatron, but the *Zohar* explains that although Joshua was the "lad" (*i.e.*, Metatron), he was also "defective" (on account of Adam's eating from the tree of knowledge).<sup>15</sup> Thus, when Moses hears that Metatron will lead the people, he pleads that YHVH should lead the people directly, and YHVH agrees to do so. (Exodus 33:15-17.)

Several additional hints suggest a link between Joshua and Metatron. Moses hints about this link when he says to Joshua: "You are the one who is vengeful for me." (Numbers 11:29.) But the biggest hints appear in the Book of Joshua. Near the beginning of the book, Joshua has a vision of Metatron:

And it was when Joshua was in Jericho that he raised his eyes, and he saw, and — behold — a man was standing

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<sup>15</sup> *Zohar* 1:53a, translated in Matt, *The Zohar (Pritzker Edition)*, vol. 1, pp. 294-296.

opposite him with his sword drawn in his hand. Joshua . . . said to him, “Are you for us or for our enemies?” He said, “Not, for I am the Prince of the Legion of YHVH. Now, I have come.” Joshua fell before him to the ground and prostrated and said to him, “What does my Lord speak to his servant?”<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, at the end of the Book of Joshua, Joshua’s final words are: “You will not be able to serve YHVH, for He is a Holy God, He is a God of Vengeance. *He will not forgive your transgressions or your sins.*” (Joshua 24:19, italics added.) Here, Joshua uses the exact phrase (“He will not forgive . . .”) that the Book of Exodus uses to describe Metatron. Joshua’s description of YHVH as an unforgiving “God of Vengeance” tells us more about Joshua than it tells us about YHVH (whom we know to be the divine aspect of mercy).

Let us consider again the scriptural verses about Benayahu:

And Benayahu the son of Yehoyada, . . . abundant [in] acts, he struck down two altar-stones [*ariel*] of Moab, and he went down and slew the lion in the midst of a well in a day of snow. And he slew an Egyptian man . . . .”<sup>17</sup>

The *Zohar* interprets Benayahu to be embodying the divine aspect of fierceness. Acting as this instrument of divine retribution, the *Zohar* reports that “Benayahu” (*i.e.*, God) destroyed the two temples:

*He smote the two Ariel of Moab* [citation to 2 Samuel]. Two sanctuaries existed because of Him, were nourished by Him: First Temple and Second Temple. As soon as He departed, the flow flowing from above ceased. *He*, as it were, *smote* them, destroying and obliterating them, and the Holy Throne fell . . . . [¶] Further, *He went down and*

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<sup>16</sup> Joshua 5:13-14.

<sup>17</sup> 2 Samuel 23:20-21; see also 1 Chronicles 11:22-23.

*slew the lion* [citation to 2 Samuel]. In former times, when this river gushed its waters below, [the people of] Israel were fulfilled, offering offerings and sacrifices to atone for their souls. Then from above would descend the image of a lion, whom they could see on the altar, crouching over its prey, consuming sacrifices . . . . [¶] When sins prevailed, He descended to the rungs below, and He killed that lion . . . . Seeing this, that Other Side was emboldened to send a dog to eat the offerings.<sup>18</sup>

The passage continues with the text already quoted above, describing Benayahu as Moses' executioner. The person in Torah who most perfectly fits *Zohar's* description of the fierce Benayahu, meting out God's retribution, is the righteous and militant Joshua.

That is not to suggest that Joshua did an evil thing by slaying Moses. Moses committed a capital offense by using the name YHVH to destroy Korach, and Moses' Torah told the verdict: "Any man that will blaspheme his God, he will bear his sin . . . . Break for break, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. . . . And the one that smites a man shall die." (Leviticus 24:10-23.) Moses acted, and Moses was required to "bear his sin." "They took the blasphemer to the outside of the camp, and they[, acting through an agent,] stoned him [with] a stone, and the descendants of Israel did according to what YHVH commanded to Moses." (Leviticus 24:23.) Joshua did not do wrong. After Moses used the name to kill Korach and Korach's followers, the Assembly convened and indicted Moses and Aaron for murder, saying: "You caused the people of YHVH to die." (Numbers 17:6-7.) Joshua merely executed the verdict that Moses had written down in the Torah.

But the *Zohar* says that Joshua was "defective."<sup>19</sup> What if some tiny blemish in Joshua's soul prevented him from seeing to the core of the matter? He judged the situation according to what

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<sup>18</sup> *Zohar* 1:6b, translated in Matt, *The Zohar (Pritzker Edition)*, vol. 1, pp. 39-40.

<sup>19</sup> *Zohar* 1:53a, translated in Matt, *The Zohar (Pritzker Edition)*, vol. 1, pp. 294-296.

he understood, and he meted out justice according to the letter of the law, but had he seen every subtle nuance of the situation? Had he read *the white spaces between the letters of the law*? Had he read the *hidden words* of Moses' Torah? Did Joshua of the tribe of Ephraim hasten too quickly to judgment? "By a prophet, YHVH brought Israel up from Egypt . . . . *Ephraim has angered bitterly . . . .*" (Hosea 12:14-15, italics added.) In later times, of course, "Ephraim" became the "Northern Kingdom," which continually rebelled against the Kingdom of Judea. (1 Kings 12:19.) And the Book of Psalms tells of YHVH: "He despised the tent of Joseph, and the tribe of Ephraim He did not choose, and *He chose the tribe of Judah*, Mount Zion that He loves." (Psalms 78:67-68, italics added.)

## VIII

The Book of Numbers appears on its surface to be a series of odd, disconnected stories, but when these stories are sewn together, the book becomes a dramatic tale of power politics, rebellion, and immense tragedy. But there is one odd ritual of the book that remains elusive: The sacrifice of the "red heifer" (*parah adumah*), described in chapter 19.

The sacrifice of the red heifer acts as a powerful source of atonement for the community; its ashes are the ultimate detergent, removing the miasma of death and sexual sin. But before we examine the secret of the red heifer sacrifice, let us recall a delightful story from the Babylonia Talmud (*Shabbat* 31a).

A man comes to Shammai, who was the head of a prominent school of Torah learning in the first century of the Common Era. The man seeks to convert to Judaism. He asks: "How many Torahs do the Jews have?" Shammai replies: "We have two Torahs — the written Torah and the Torah of our oral tradition." The man says: "I have faith in your written Torah, but I do not have faith in your oral tradition. I wish to convert, but you must teach me only your written Torah." Shammai dismisses the man, so the man goes over to the school of Hillel. He asks Hillel: "How many Torahs do the Jews have?" Hillel replies: "We have two Torahs — the written Torah and the Torah of our oral tradition." The man says: "I have faith in your written Torah, but I do not

have faith in your oral tradition. I wish to convert, but you must teach me only your written Torah.” So Hillel accepts the man as a convert.

The man begins studying with Hillel. Hillel starts by teaching the man the ABCs in Hebrew: *alef, beit, gimmel, dalet* . . . . The man goes home and memorizes the Hebrew alphabet. He does not cease studying until he can recite the entire alphabet from beginning to end. The next day the man returns to Hillel for a second lesson. Hillel again teaches him the ABCs, but this time Hillel rearranges the letters, placing them in a new sequence. The man objects: “Yesterday, the alphabet was ABCD; today it is ACDB!?” Hillel smiles and says to him: “You relied on me yesterday to teach you the written Torah. So today, rely on me to teach you the Torah of our oral tradition.”

In other words, *the Torah of the oral tradition transposes the letters of the Torah*. Here then is the secret of the red heifer sacrifice: The Hebrew phrase *PaRaH ADuMaH* (“red heifer”) contains the same letters as the phrase *ADaM Ha-PoReH* (“fertile man”). If one re-reads the sacrifice of the red heifer considering the possibility that *the red heifer is a man* and that the ritual is an instruction to Moses and Aaron about Aaron’s impending death, then the ritual takes on a powerful new significance — one very similar to the Christian teaching that Jesus’ death cleansed his devotees of sin.

In the chart below, the death of Aaron is described in the left column, and the sacrifice of the red heifer in the middle column. The right column includes verses of scripture that reveal the connections between the texts. The link between the death of Aaron and the sacrifice of the red heifer is also proved by the hermeneutical rule of *gezerah shavah* (the use of common words and expressions), and therefore the chart should be read both vertically and horizontally.

<p><b>The Death of Aaron</b></p>	<p><b>The Sacrifice of the Red Heifer</b></p>	<p><b>Decoding the Torah</b></p>
<p>And YHVH said <b><u>to Moses and to Aaron</u></b> . . . . (Numbers 20:23)</p> <p>“Aaron shall be gathered to his people, for he shall not come to the land that I gave to the descendants of Israel, because you defied [the word of] my mouth at the Waters of Contention. <b><u>Take Aaron</u></b> and <b><u>Elazar</u></b> his son, and cause them to ascend Mount Hor, and strip Aaron of his garments and cause <b><u>Elazar</u></b> his son to dress in them . . .</p> <p>. . . and Aaron will be gathered</p>	<p>And YHVH spoke <b><u>to Moses and to Aaron</u></b> . . . . (Numbers 19:1)</p> <p>“This is a decree of the Torah that YHVH commanded, saying: Speak to the descendants of Israel and they shall <b><u>take</u></b> to you [Moses] a <b><u>Red Heifer</u></b>, perfect, that [has] not in it a blemish, that has not had a yoke ascend upon it, and you shall give her to <b><u>Elazar</u></b> the Priest.” (Numbers 19:1-3)</p> <p>“And he will draw her out to the <b><u>outside of the camp</u></b>.” (Numbers 19:3)</p>	<p><i>PaRaH ADuMaH (“<b><u>Red Heifer</u></b>”) equals ADaM Ha-PoReH (“<b><u>Fertile Man</u></b>”).</i></p> <p>Why <b><u>Elazar</u></b>?</p> <p>And the entire Assembly led [the man found gathering logs] to the <b><u>outside of the camp</u></b>, and they stoned him with stones, and</p>

<p>and <b>die</b> there.” (Numbers 20:24-26)</p> <p>And Moses did just as YHVH commanded, and they ascended to Mount Hor before the eyes of <b>the entire Assembly</b>, and Moses stripped Aaron of his garments, and he dressed Elazar his son with them, <b>and Aaron died there</b> at the head of the mountain, and Moses and Elazar descended from the mountain. (Numbers 20:27-28)</p>	<p>“And he shall <b>slaughter</b> her before him. And Elazar the Priest shall take from her blood with his finger and sprinkle from the blood toward the face of the Tent of the Meeting seven times, and he [Moses] shall burn the heifer before his eyes — its hide, and its flesh, and its blood, upon its dung, he shall burn. And the Priest shall take cedarwood and hyssop and crimson thread, and he shall cause them to be sent in the midst of the burning of the heifer. And the Priest shall immerse his garments and wash his flesh in water, and after he may come to the camp, and the Priest shall be impure until evening. And the one who burns her shall immerse his clothes in water and wash his flesh in water, and he will be impure until evening. A pure man shall gather</p>	<p><b>he died</b> as YHVH commanded to Moses. (Numbers 15:36)</p> <p>He who <b>slaughters</b> a cow slays a man. (Isaiah 66:3)</p> <p>And <b>the entire Assembly</b> led [the man found gathering logs] to the outside of the camp, and they stoned him with stones, and <b>he died</b> as YHVH commanded to Moses. (Numbers 15:36)</p> <p>And the entire Assembly led [the man found</p>
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	<p>the ash of the heifer and rest it <b>outside the camp</b> in a pure place, and it will be for the Assembly of the descendants of Israel, for a safekeeping, it is for water of separation from sin.” (Numbers 19:3-9)</p>	<p>gathering logs] to the <b>outside of the camp</b>, and they stoned him with stones, and he died as YHVH commanded to Moses. (Numbers 15:36)</p>
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If one reads about the sacrifice of the red heifer without knowing the secret, one is surprised to find that the rite takes place “outside the camp,” where executions take place (Leviticus 24:23; Numbers 15:36), instead of on the North side of the altar, where sacrifices are slaughtered (Leviticus 1:11). One is also surprised to find that the rite is performed by Elazar instead of by Aaron. After Aaron’s initiation as Chief Priest, he performs every important rite, but here we have the most important of rites, the rite that produces the waters of purification, and *Elazar*, not Aaron, is presiding. The answer to these puzzles becomes obvious when we realize *that Aaron is the red heifer*. He is not presiding as priest, because he is *the sacrificial victim*, being executed outside the camp. “He who slaughters a cow slays a man,” tells the prophet. (Isaiah 66:3.) And the names of Aaron’s oldest sons are Avihua and Nadav, which translate as “My father (*avi*), he is (*hua*) a freewill offering (*nadav*).”

The rabbinic tradition asserts that there have been nine red heifer sacrifices, and the tenth is yet to come (*i.e.*, in messianic times). (See *Mishnah Parah* 3:5.) Thus, the red heifer is not merely Aaron (the martyr); it is many other holy martyrs, too.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Consistent with what is taught in the Babylonian Talmud (*Gittin* 60a-60b), the first red heifer sacrifice took place at the time of the consecration of the wilderness tabernacle (one year after the Israelites left Egypt). In that instance, the “red heifer” was Aaron’s eldest two sons, Avihua and Nadav, who both died at that time. (See Leviticus 10:1-5.) Recall in this connection that after the sin of the golden calf, YHVH was very angry with Aaron, even “to destroy him,” and that Moses prayed for Aaron. (Deuteronomy 9:20.) Moses’

There is a further tradition that no one knows the secret of the red heifer. It is argued that even King Solomon, who was famed for his wisdom, did not know the secret. Of course, the reason for this bit of pious dogma is to conceal the martyrdom of Aaron and Moses. King Solomon surely knew the secret. He said about the mystery of the red heifer: “[I]t is far from me.” (Ecclesiastes 7:23.) Perhaps “it” was far from him, but he was not referring to the secret; rather he was referring to the event itself — far away in a future life.

## Part IV: “Once . . . for All Time” — in Circular Time

Christian theology asserts the uniqueness of Jesus’ sacrificial death. We read in the Book of Hebrews: “[W]e have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. . . . But when this one [*i.e.*, Christ] had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. . . . For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.” (Hebrews 10:10-14 [Revised Standard Version].) But consider the orbits of the planets. Consider the revolving astrological forces, which the authors of scripture considered to be absolutely valid. (Genesis 15:5; Ecclesiastes 1:9; Matthew 2:1-2, 9-10.<sup>21</sup>) Consider *circular time*, rotating around and around, always a little different, always a little the same, with each turn of the cosmic Wheel. In *circular time*, what does “once . . . for all

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prayer apparently diverted to Aaron’s sons a divine decree that was initially intended for Aaron himself. Aaron’s own death 38 years later (Numbers 20:22-29, 33:37-39) was therefore the *second* red heifer sacrifice. This insight resolves a confusing passage from the Book of Deuteronomy. Moses there says that Aaron died at the time of the consecration of the tabernacle. (Deuteronomy 10:6-9.) Moses is referring to Aaron’s *decreed* death, which became manifest in the death of Aaron’s two sons.

<sup>21</sup> The *magi* who came to see the newborn Jesus were Zoroastrians. *Magi* were experts at astrology, and hence they knew of Jesus’ birth from seeing the rising of his star.

time” mean? In circular time, “all time” means “all the way around the circle,” and every time that wheel turns around, “once” occurs *once again*. The sacrifice that was “once . . . for all time” was *Adam’s death*. Moses’ death and Jesus’ death were instances of “once” occurring *once again*.

A personal anecdote will elucidate the connection between Moses and Jesus. Here is the phrase-name that Torah uses for the blasphemer:

בְּנֵי־אִשָּׁה יִשְׂרָאֵלִית וְהוּא בְּנֵי־אִישׁ מִצְרִי

“The son of an Israelite woman and he was the son of an Egyptian man.” (Leviticus 24:10.)

I was once studying this passage with a congregation of orthodox Jews. The rabbi asked if we knew who the blasphemer was. No one knew, so the rabbi highlighted certain letters in the phrase-name the Torah uses for the blasphemer:

בְּנֵי־אִשָּׁה יִשְׂרָאֵלִית וְהוּא בְּנֵי־אִישׁ מִצְרִי

He gathered the highlighted letters, to reveal the identity of the blasphemer:

ישו מצרי

“Jesu[s] [the] Egyptian”

Notice also that a Hebrew letter *mem* (M) (the first letter of the Hebrew word מצרי — *i.e.*, *Mitzri* or “Egyptian”) can be drawn by combining a Hebrew letter *nun* (N) and a Hebrew letter *vov* (V) into one letter:

נו = מ  
VN M

Therefore, the *mem* (M) of *Mitzri* (“Egyptian”) can also be read as a *nun-vov* (NV), producing the word נוצרי (*Notzri* or “Nazarene”):

$$\begin{aligned} \text{מצרי} &= \text{נוצרי} \\ \text{Mitzri} &= \text{Notzri} \end{aligned}$$

This small adjustment yields the following name for the blasphemer:

ישו נוצרי

*Yeshu [ha-]Notzri* (“Jesu[s] [the] Nazarene” or “Jesus of Nazareth”)

*Yeshu ha-Notzri* is a person described in the Babylonian Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 43a). According to the Talmud, *Yeshu ha-Notzri* was a magician who led Jews astray. He was stoned and then hung from a tree on the eve of Passover. Significantly, the Talmud discusses *Yeshu ha-Notzri* (i.e., “Jesus of Nazareth”) in the context of explicating Torah’s description of the blasphemer, thereby subtly linking the two. The relevant passage from the Talmud is excerpted below; the excerpt is long but worth reading carefully *because it unambiguously endorses the divine origin of Jesus*:

**MISHNAH.** IF THEN THEY FIND HIM INNOCENT, THEY DISCHARGE HIM; BUT IF NOT, HE GOES FORTH TO BE STONED, AND A HERALD PRECEDES HIM . . . .

**GEMARA.** . . . [¶] AND A HERALD PRECEDES HIM etc. This implies, only immediately before [the execution], but not previous thereto. [In contradiction to this] it was taught: On the eve of the Passover Yeshu the Nazarene was hanged. For forty days before the execution took place, a herald went forth and cried, ‘He is

going forth to be stoned because he has practised sorcery and enticed Israel to apostacy. Anyone who can say anything in his favour, let him come forward and plead on his behalf.’ But since nothing was brought forward in his favour he was hanged on the eve of the Passover and the eve of Sabbath! — Ulla retorted: ‘Do you suppose that he was one for whom a defence be made? Was he not a *Mesith* [enticer], concerning whom Scripture says, *Neither shalt thou spare, neither shalt thou conceal him?* [(Deuteronomy 13:9.)] With Yeschu however it was different, for he was connected with the government [or royalty, *i.e.*, influential].’ [¶] Our Rabbis taught: Yeschu had five disciples, Matthai, Nakai, Nezer, Buni and Todah. When Matthai was brought [before the court] he said to them [the judges]; Shall Matthai be executed? Is it not written, *Matthai [when] shall I come and appear before God?* [(Psalms 42:3.)] Thereupon they retorted; Yes, Matthai shall be executed, since it is written, . . . *Matthai [when] shall [he] die and his name perish.* [(Psalms 41:6.)] When Nakai was brought in he said to them; Shall Nakai be executed? Is it not written, *Naki [the innocent] and the righteous slay thou not?* [(Exodus 23:7.)] Yes, was the answer, Nakai shall be executed, since it is written, *in secret places does Naki [the innocent] slay.* [(Psalms 10:8.)] When Nezer was brought in, he said; Shall Nezer be executed? Is it not written, *And Nezer [a twig] shall grow forth out of his roots.* [(Isaiah 11:1.)] Yes, they said, Nezer shall be executed, since it is written, *But thou art cast forth away from thy grave like Nezer [an abhorred offshoot].* [(Isaiah 14:19.)] When Buni was brought in, he said; Shall Buni be executed? Is it not written, *Beni [my son], my first born?* [(Exodus 4:22.)] Yes, they said, Buni shall be executed, since it is written, *Behold I will slay Bine-ka [thy son] thy first born.* [(Exodus 4:23.)] And when Todah was brought in, he said to them; Shall Todah be executed? Is it not written, *A psalm for Todah*

[thanksgiving]? [(Psalms 100:1.)] Yes, they answered, Todah shall be executed, since it is written, *Whoso offereth the sacrifice of Todah [thanksgiving] honoured me.* [(Psalms 50:23.)]<sup>22</sup>

Notice that the names of the five disciples can be read together as a sentence: “*Matthai nakai nezer buni todah.*” If we adjust the vowels in the manner that the Talmud itself proposes, we get: “*Matthai* (‘when’) *naki* (‘innocent’) *nezer* (‘offshoot’) *beni* (‘My son’) *todah* (‘thanksgiving offering’),” which translates as, “*When an innocent offshoot, My son, is a thanksgiving offering.*” Significantly, the crucifixion of Jesus is referred to in Christian sacrificial ritual as a “Eucharist,” which is the Greek word for “gratitude” or “thanksgiving.” Thus, the early Christians understood Jesus’ sacrificial death to be a *thanksgiving offering* (*todah*).

Consistent with Jewish hermeneutics (in which texts must be read on several levels at once), the Talmud is being very subtle in its discussion of *Yeshu ha-Notzri* (“Jesus of Nazareth”). It first states the official Jewish teaching that *Yeshu ha-Notzri* was a magician who taught apostasy; he was tried, condemned, and executed. More subtly, by discussing *Yeshu* in conjunction with its exposition of the blasphemer passage in Torah, the Talmud links *Yeshu* to the blasphemer, a seemingly pejorative association (until we consider the *Moses* was the original blasphemer). But then the Talmud becomes even more subtle. In listing the “names” of *Yeshu*’s five disciples, the Talmud declares (in an encoded fashion) that *Yeshu* was actually “innocent,” that he was the “son” of God, and that his death was a “thanksgiving offering” that honored God.

The story of Sabbatai Sevi provides a more recent example of a similar double teaching. Sabbatai Sevi was a Jewish messiah figure who lived in the 17<sup>th</sup> century of the Common Era. He disappointed (and embarrassed) his huge Jewish following when,

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<sup>22</sup> *Sanhedrin* 43a, translated in Jacob Shachter and H. Freedman (translators), Isidore Epstein (editor), *The Babylonian Talmud*, vol. 23 (Soncino Press 1935), pp. 281-282.

rather than defeating the sultan of the Ottoman Empire and liberating the holy land, he instead *converted to Islam*. A messiah that converts to a foreign religion is as troubling as a messiah who dies unceremoniously on a wooden cross. The official teaching of the orthodox rabbinical elite is therefore that Sabbatai Sevi was a “false messiah” worthy of universal condemnation. But when we study the matter more closely, we find that many preeminent rabbis during Sabbatai Sevi’s lifetime (and long afterward) acknowledged the validity of Sabbatai Sevi’s messianic claim and argued that his conversion to Islam was for a divine purpose.

When the Messiah’s soul appears in human form, he (or she) *shatters the expectations of the fundamentalists*. If the Messiah then fails to bring about the final redemption, his liberating doctrine must be repressed, because the hoary tradition — even if burdened by centuries of unenlightened legalism — can best protect the unsophisticated masses from the twin disasters of atheism and moral nihilism, or so it is argued. The safe course, then, for those who know the secret is to repeat the official teaching and to express the truth of the matter in an encoded fashion, for the eyes of the discerning.

Judaism embraces the core Christian idea that, through the martyrdom of a perfectly righteous soul, the bonds of sin and death are broken (Numbers 35:25-28), but Judaism goes further. Judaism gives us a powerful way to *cleave* to that Living One who gained victory over death — a way to cleave not just in our thoughts and hopes, but also *physically*, with our *daily actions*. Moses’ martyred soul is alive in his Torah, and by wearing the Torah on our limbs, by *doing the Torah*, we gain him. But there is another way, an even more perfect way, to cleave to the Living One. That is by the simple act of giving. By giving, we become one with the One who became a Gift.

This essay has shown Moses’ life and death to be remarkably similar to Jesus’ life and death. In one sense, however, it does not really matter whether Moses was the messiah of his generation, willingly accepting martyrdom for the sake of the world, nor does it matter whether Elijah was, or whether Jesus was, or whether Sabbatai Sevi was — for we are not living in the generations of

Moses, or Elijah, or Jesus, or Sabbatai Sevi. We are living *now*. We could argue about Moses, or Elijah, or Jesus, or Sabbatai Sevi, but what would be the point? The more valuable question is, Who is the messiah today? — for he (or she) is incarnate in our generation, too.

According to Jewish tradition, the soul of the Messiah is born in every generation. Moses promises to each future generation the coming of a prophet “like me,” saying that the prophet can be known by the power of his words to foretell future events. (Deuteronomy 18:15-22.) Jesus makes the same promise to future generations, saying that the prophet will be known by the fruits of his deeds. (Matthew 7:15-20.) “What was is what will be, and what was done is what will be done. There is nothing new beneath the sun.” (Ecclesiastes 1:9.) *Beneath the sun* is the critical point. Beneath the astrological luminaries that mete out earthly time, there is nothing new. Time — *astrological* time — is circular.

## Conclusion

The Book of Numbers tells the dramatic end to a dramatic story — a story of a few thousand Israelite slaves who escaped Egypt and fled to the desert, led by an Egyptian prince named Thutmose (Moses). These desert refugees formed a government — the Assembly — and accepted Thutmose as their king. They named one of their own, Aaron the Levite, as their chief priest. These Israelite refugees worshipped the Canaanite gods of their ancestors — *El* and *Hadad (Shaddai)* — but Thutmose, their foreign king, worshipped the Egyptian god *Djyehudi* (“Thoth”). Knowing that the Israelites were jealous of their name for God, Thutmose (or perhaps someone who came later) hid the name *Djyehudi*, writing it as YHVH instead of YHVDY (*Yehudi*).

Korach, who aspired to be chief priest, was the leader of one of the major political parties within the Assembly, advocating a return to Egypt. He attempted to depose Moses and Aaron in a *coup d'état*, and Moses and Aaron responded by killing Korach and his gang of rebels, using a powerful incantation.

But even after Korach died, Korach continued to have many supporters in the Assembly. The Assembly tried Moses and Aaron for murder, convicted both of them, and sentenced them to death by stoning. Before Moses was stoned, he was permitted to address the Assembly, and his poignant speech is recorded in the Book of Deuteronomy. Then Joshua, as the new head of the Assembly, executed Moses. Moses died a criminal's death, but also as a martyr for YHVH.

Joshua became king in place of Moses (Numbers 27:15-23), and he led the ragtag army of refugees in a successful, but brutal, war against Midian. This war is recorded in chapter 31 of the Book of Numbers as being directed by Moses, but its violence is completely out of character for Moses. This is *Joshua*, the new Moses, of whom YHVH says: "He will not forgive your transgressions." (Exodus 23:21; Joshua 24:19.) According to the Babylonian Talmud, when a student speaks, he or she is supposed to open with "My teacher said," especially if the teacher is still alive.<sup>23</sup> Hence, so long as Moses was alive, Joshua's instructions were expressed in the form "Moses said . . .," and they are recorded in the Torah as the statements of Moses.

Two clues support this reading of chapter 31. The first clue is YHVH's statement to Moses at the beginning of the chapter: "Avenge the vengeance of the descendants of Israel against the Midianites *after* you are gathered to your people." (Numbers 31:2, italics added.) Do it *after* you die, not before! Do it, in other words, through Joshua, your successor. The second clue is Elazar's brash speaking out of turn concerning the spoils of the Midian war, declaring: "This is a decree of the Torah that YHVH commanded to Moses . . ." (Numbers 31:21.) Since when does Elazar announce decrees of the Torah!? He does not. All rules of the Torah are announced by Moses.<sup>24</sup> Elazar's breach of protocol

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<sup>23</sup> See *Eruvin* 63a-63b; *Yevamot* 96b-97a; see also Rashi on Leviticus 24:14, translated in *Rashi: Commentary on the Torah (The Sapirstein Edition)*, vol. 3 (Mesorah Publications 1999), p. 313.

<sup>24</sup> Leviticus 10:8 is not an exception. The tradition relates that Moses announced the rule about intoxication to Aaron, and Aaron was allowed to convey the rule to the Israelites. (See Leviticus 10:11.)

is placed here as a signal to the thoughtful reader — a breach that proves the rule: Moses is no longer doing the actual speaking; rather, Joshua and Elazar are speaking, but according to the accepted rule, Moses is *credited* as the speaker. After the transfer of power — after the clothing of Elazar in Aaron’s garments (Numbers 20:23-28) and the appointment of Joshua as leader of the Assembly (Numbers 27:15-23) — all references to what “Moses said” are actually the statements of Joshua and Elazar, who are the new king and chief priest, respectively, of the Israelites.

Joshua, scion of Ephraim, led the Israelites against Midian. Then he moved his violent, scorched-earth attack westward, across the Jordan, brutally occupying the holy land and defeating 31 Canaanite kings. (Joshua, chs. 10-12.) And like the Al-Seidi people in *The Great Escape*, the Israelite people repeatedly reverted from the universalism of YHVH to the chauvinistic, cultic mentality of the people around them, and they repeatedly returned to servitude. With each return to persecution, they cried out for a redeemer, and each time, God sent a redeemer, but when that new redeemer died, the Israelites again renounced the universalism of YHVH, and they again returned to servitude. (See Judges 2:10-19 and *passim*.)

“Listen!” Moses implored the Israelites in his final speech to the Assembly, “*El Shaddai* is YHVH. Our god — YHVH — is Universal.” (Deuteronomy 6:4.) Of course, the text of the Torah uses the word *Israel* in this famous prayer, not the words *El Shaddai*, but recall that *El Shaddai* is a Hebrew anagram of *Israel*.

*Sh'mA!*

“Listen!”

*Israel Adonai.*

“*El Shaddai* is YHVH.”

*Eloheinu — Adonai — AhoD.*

“Our god — YHVH — is universal.”

And why is the letter “a” (*ayin*) of *sh’ma* written large in the Torah? Because in Hebrew *sh’ma* can be read as *shem ayin* (“name of 70”), signifying a universal name of God that incorporates the 70 gods of the 70 nations. And why is the letter “d” (*dalet*) of *achod* writ large in the Torah? Because in Hebrew the name YHVH contains a hidden letter “d” (*dalet*). The name is really *YehuDi* — “your god[, O Israel,] from the land of Egypt.” (Hosea 13:4; see also Hosea 12:10.)



*Djyehudi*

“Thoth” (in English)

Author of *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*