Impressions: Facing the Rock

Avivah Zornberg

Failure to Sanctify?

The process of sanctification represents a biblical and rabbinic ideal of human development. The Torah commands, "You shall make yourselves holy" (Leviticus 11:44), "You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6), and "You shall be holy for I, the Eternal your God, am holy" (Leviticus 19:2). This indicates a process in time—a "morality of aspiration," in Lon Fuller's terms[1]—that is subtly but clearly different from Koraḥ's claim that "the whole community—all of them are holy" (Numbers 16:3).

In biblical law, this process is often mapped out in terms of specific ritual laws: removing pollutions of various kinds, preparing the people for entry into sacred space, and preparing the accoutrements of sacred space for the indwelling of God. However concrete the practices of sanctification may be, the overarching ideal of holiness both transcends and motivates its practices. And that ideal in some sense resists being reduced to its ritual elements.

In that sense, the practices of holiness have often been associated with restraint, rather than action—a fastidiousness, for instance, about sexual purity. In the verse "You shall be holy for I, the Eternal your God, am holy" (Leviticus 19:2), the command to be holy, *k'doshim*, is understood by the sages as an injunction to be *p'rushim*, to be *separate*[2]—that is, one should keep away from whatever endangers holiness. A sense of dedicated difference comes to inform one's way

of living ordinary, everyday life.[3] One implication is that holiness and sanctification are felt to be indefinable in positive terms. As a kind of *via negativa*—the notion that God is diminished by any positive description, which must necessarily be limited—human holiness likewise can only be intimated by what it is not. Ineffable, it can only be protected both by its legal safeguards and by the sensibility of those who care about it.

Ultimately, according to Sforno, "You shall be holy" represents the ideal of *imitatio Dei*, God's wish for the human being to be created "in our form and after our image" (Genesis 1:26).[4] Indeed, to sanctify oneself is equivalent, say the sages, to sanctifying God: "If you sanctify yourselves, I account it as if you had sanctified Me."[5] In biblical law, the collective is the implicit bearer of this ideal; for the rabbis, the focus shifts to the individual and the capacity of the individual to "sanctify God." In sanctifying oneself one effectively bears witness to God's holiness, as one's state of being in itself declares God's holiness in the world. Human holiness evokes for others the reality of God's holiness.

In view of this, it is striking that there seems to be little in the way of biblical narrative that deals with this central concept of sanctification, despite the fact that it is precisely the strength of narrative to flesh out elusive processes and to convey them in temporal and social contexts. The root *kof-dalet-shin*, either as an adjective or as a verb, used transitively or intransitively, seems shy of narrative frameworks.

In fact, I believe that the only narrative that focuses its ultimate meaning on this issue is the enigmatic episode of the rock at Merivah. Here, God pronounces the last word on the narrative: it is the failure of Moses and Aaron to "have faith in Me, to *sanctify Me* before the eyes of the Israelites" that defines their fate: "…therefore you shall not lead this congregation into the land" (Numbers 20:12). I suggest that by exploring the complex layers of this narrative—its resonances both with the beginning of the Exodus story and beyond—we may approach, in the way that narrative alone can, an understanding of the

intertwined ideals of *emunah* and *k'dushah*, faith and sanctification. In this narrative, uniquely, a space is created in which a crucial process, in failing to happen, leaves its deep imprint.

Here is the story in its entirety, found in Numbers 20:

> [1]The Israelites arrived, the whole community, at the wilderness of Zin on the first new moon, and the people stayed at Kadesh. Miriam died and was buried there. [2]The community was without water, and joined against Moses and Aaron. [3]The people quarreled with Moses, saying, "If only we had perished when our brothers perished in the presence of the Eternal. [4]Why have you brought the congregation of the Eternal into this wilderness, for us and our beasts to die there? [5]Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to bring us to this evil place, a place with no grain or figs or vines or pomegranates? And there is no water to drink!"
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> [6]Moses and Aaron came away from the congregation to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and fell on their faces. The Presence of the Eternal appeared to them, [7]and the Eternal spoke to Moses, saying, [8]"Take the rod, you and your brother Aaron, and gather the community, and before their very eyes speak to the rock so that it gives forth of its water. So you shall produce water for them from the rock and you shall provide drink for the congregation and their beasts."
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> [9]And Moses took the rod from before the presence of the Eternal, as he had been commanded. [10]Moses and Aaron assembled the congregation in front of the rock; and he said to them, "Listen, you rebels, shall we produce water for you from this rock?" [11]And Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod. And copious water emerged, and the community and their beasts drank.
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> [12]And the Eternal said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm My sanctity before the eyes of the Israelite people, therefore you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them." [13]These are the waters of Merivah—meaning that the Israelites quarreled with the Eternal, through which God affirmed the sanctity of the Divine.

The story begins with the death of Miriam, her burial, and the lack of water. The people attack Moses and Aaron who seem to flee from them[6]—from the presence of the community to the presence of God. God's glory then appears to them. On every other occasion where this happens in the book of Numbers, it is followed by stern words of judgment.[7] Here, however, God speaks tenderly about providing water to nurture the people: Moses is instructed to personally and intentionally produce the water *for them* and to bring it to their lips. When Moses strikes the rock twice, the water simply "emerges" (he does not directly produce it), and he does not personally tend to the people's needs (rather, "the community drank").

It is at this point, when the narrative seems to have come to a happy conclusion, that God declares the inscrutable decree, couched in language that rings with uncanny lucidity: "*Because* you did not trust Me enough to affirm My sanctity before the eyes of the Israelite people, *therefore* you shall not lead this congregation into the land…" (verse 12).[8] In this logical form the death sentence is even more shocking, for the explanation itself needs explaining. Moses and Aaron did not trust in God? They failed to sanctify God? But the self-evident tone of the decree is carried over to the last sentence, where the waters are named for the people's "quarrel" with God, who *is* "sanctified by them." We are left with the apparent coherence of a closure that purportedly justifies the original name of the place—Kadesh (verse 1)—without, in fact, clarifying anything. How is God sanctified in this place where Moses and Aaron have failed to sanctify the Divine?

This enigmatic narrative has been the subject of multiple interpretations. *Or Ha-ḥayyim*[9] in fact counts ten such theories, only to conclude that none is satisfactory; in spite of this—or perhaps because of this—he declares that the reader is still obliged to make sense of this most resistant narrative.[10] This pattern of criticizing previous theories and suggesting a new one has its absurd side. *Or Ha-ḥayyim* quotes Luzzatto: Moses committed one sin and various commentaries have attributed to him more than thirteen different

sins! Critical ingenuity ends up riddling Moses' character with endless flaws—surely a perverse exercise!

But the history of exegesis of this narrative demonstrates at least one thing quite clearly: that the Torah has not provided a clear answer to the question of Moses' culpability. Too many different understandings of Moses' failure hover over a gap in narrative meaning.

Scenarios of Sanctification

The classic explanation of Moses' sin is found in Rashi's comment to verse 12: Moses was commanded to speak to the rock, not to strike it. Rashi writes: "If you had spoken to the rock and it had produced water, I would have been sanctified before the eyes of the community. They would have said, 'If this rock, which does not speak or hear and has no need for sustenance, fulfills God's word, how much the more so should we do likewise!'"

Rashi emphasizes the public nature of the scene, noting that it is enacted before the eyes of the mass of Israelites—the same mass from whom Moses and Aaron have just fled. God finds Moses and Aaron fallen on their faces and urges them to return to face the people. Publicly acting before their faces and their eyes, Moses and Aaron are to speak to the rock. But how would this have generated faith, or trust, or sanctification? What, after all, is the difference between striking a rock and speaking to it? One might say that striking the rock is precisely what is meant by "speaking" to it.[11] How else does one communicate with a thing, an inanimate object that is impervious to words? A blow with a stick is just the language that a rock understands!

But Rashi's scenario of sanctification is intriguing. The rock's obedience to God's words would have produced a thoughtful response in the people, who would have seen themselves in the place

of the rock. By an imaginative act of introjection,[12] they would have come to recognize the power of God's word in their own vulnerable and dependent lives. Their own human situation would have been highlighted by the miracle of the rock. The purpose of the whole exercise was the impact it would have on the people's eyes. Failing to speak and instead hitting the rock, Moses misses the point; the imaginative process is short-circuited, as the double blow of the rod induces in the people no self-reflection.

Many commentaries are unsatisfied by Rashi's reading. In the narrative, after all, God tells Moses to "take the rod" (verse 8): for what purpose is he to take it, if not to strike with it? And striking the rock does produce the water that God had promised. There is no indication in the narrative that God is displeased with this act—until the shocking coda that immediately follows.

Rambam takes a different tack.[13] Moses' sin lays in his address to the people and not in his striking the rock. An inappropriate anger informs his words: "Listen, you rebels…" Moses is punished, however, not for the anger itself, but rather because God at this moment is not personally angry with the people: Moses is thus misrepresenting God, who has just spoken solicitously of them. It is the public context of Moses' angry outburst that leads to God's judgment. Moses has failed to create in the people the trust that a sense of God's love would have generated; he has not sanctified God by conveying a sense of divine nurturing concern for the people. The gravity of such a moment of misrepresentation, Rambam implies, justifies God's decree.

The Turning Point

Instead of criticizing the people for their complaints, God turns to the leaders. God's glory appears, on this occasion, not to the whole people but to Moses and Aaron alone. A portentous moment looms for the leaders, rather than for the people.[14] For the first time, the focus of God's scrutiny shifts, and it is Moses who is held accountable

for God's sanctity in the people's eyes. As a result of this judgment, Aaron will die in the near future (Numbers 20:23–29). Moses will lead the people through the battles of Transjordan and the final months of the fortieth year. Miriam has already died, just before our narrative (Numbers 20:1), and midrashic tradition connects her death with our narrative, suggesting that the miraculous well that had accompanied the people on their journeys vanished when she died. The people thirst for water when this vital resource—Miriam's presence and her well—disappears.

This pivotal narrative, then, crystallizes an important motif in the history of the wilderness. This is the turning point: both an ending and a beginning. The three leaders fade from the scene, and the people reach a moment of transition.

The historical context of this moment is signalled in the first verse: "The Israelites arrived, the whole community, at the wilderness of Zin." Rashi, citing *Midrash Tanḥuma*, comments on the unusual harmonics of the expression: "'The Israelites…the whole community'—for those who were to die in the wilderness had already died, and these were set apart for life." Suddenly, a dramatic turning point comes to light: this is the moment when all the dying is done. The death of a generation has been completed, and God's original decree after the sin of the spies has been fulfilled. Those who survive are now set on a different journey, to life and not to death. Perhaps that is why the law of the red heifer, offering purification from death-pollution, had just now been promulgated (Numbers 19).

The poignant moment between death and life, however, carries its own mystery. We suddenly become aware that thirty-eight years have passed without our noticing. Behind the scenes, a generation has vanished into the sands. There is something uncanny about this hidden passage of time, with its harvest of so many deaths. A new generation is suddenly identified in the midrash, but in the Torah the intervening thirty-eight years go unrecorded. Suddenly the people arrive at Kadesh, at the border of Edom, at the threshold of

the promised land. In the blink of an eye, we find ourselves looking back at the unrecorded wilderness trauma. Like a traveller whose sense of continuous time and space is disrupted by a sudden sight of the Grand Canyon, the reader moves from the story of Koraḥ,[15] for whom the earth opened and closed, to our narrative of the rock. What had seemed continuous is now revealed as an abyss.

The "complete community," which has achieved the form in which it will enter the land, now loses its original leaders, one after another. There is, I suggest, a similarly uncanny character to these individual death narratives. Miriam dies—just the stark fact is reported—and suddenly there is no water. Abruptly, Moses and Aaron are sentenced to death; we are thus compelled to re-read the preceding narrative which, on a first reading, gave no hint of a sin that might merit such punishment. Aaron dies at the top of Mount Hor, where Moses divests him of his priestly robes and dresses his son in those very garments. Moses too dies at the top of a mountain, but he dies alone, overlooking the land. He dies "by the mouth of God" (Deuteronomy 34:5)—by a kiss?[16] He is buried (*va-yikbor oto*, Deuteronomy 34:6)—but who buried him? God? Or does he bury himself?[17] "And no man knows his burial-place until this very day" (Deuteronomy 34:6)—Moses, the quintessential man, did not know where he was buried?[18] These narratives cry out for interpretation. They are haunted by untold histories; couched in silences, they represent the fraught nature of moments of transition.

These narratives of transition are preceded by the mysterious law of the red heifer. This law becomes the epitome of the unfathomable in midrashic thinking:[19] a hair of the quasi-mythical red heifer both purifies those polluted by contact with death and also, in a different context, pollutes the pure. *Yalkut Shimoni* quotes Kohelet 7:23, "All this I tested with wisdom; I thought I could fathom it, but it eludes me," and comments: "Solomon said, 'I understood the whole Torah; but when I arrived at the passage of the red heifer I would search it, investigate it, interrogate it.'"[20] About this law of the red heifer, fraught with existential issues—life and death, purity and impurity—

even Solomon the wise is baffled. Similarly, as generations of commentators have testified, no key has yet been found to unlock the mystery of the rock episode at Merivah.

The rock and the rod: these are the objects that mark this transitional moment between the wilderness and the land. As we remember their history, these objects begin to vibrate before our eyes; they are *things* that are charged with narratives, with laws—ultimately, with *words*. They gleam secretly with hope and fear, with past and future, with the intense experience of those who live with them.

Two Rock Stories

God tells Moses to "take the rod." This rod was last seen in Moses' hand in that original water-from-the-rock episode at Rephidim. We read there: "The Eternal said to Moses, 'And the rod with which you struck the river—take it in your hand…and strike the rock; and water will issue from it and the people will drink.' And Moses did so before the eyes of the Israelite elders" (Exodus 17:5–6). There, Moses did exactly what was expected of him, striking the rock before the eyes of the Israelite elders. The rod did its work. And it was Moses who named the place in such a way as to register his criticism of the people: strangely, it too is called Merivah (Exodus 17:7).

What follows that early rock-water episode is the battle with Amalek: "Moses then told Joshua, 'Go forth to fight the Amalekites; tomorrow I shall stand on the hilltop *with the rod of God in my hand*'" (Exodus 17:9). The battle is waged, with the Israelites in the field and Moses on the hilltop, the position of his hands somehow governing the vicissitudes of the battle: "And it was that whenever Moses would raise up his hand, Israel would prevail; and whenever he would rest his hand, Amalek would prevail. But Moses' hands grew heavy, so they took a stone and placed it under him and he sat upon it. And Aaron and Hur supported his hands from either side, so that his hands were stable (*emunah*) until the sun set" (Exodus 17:11–12).

Here again, the rod seems to be in use—at least in the sense that Moses plans to hold it in his hand. Surprisingly, though, there is no further reference to the rod. Moses' hands alone are the focus of the narrative, determining the fortunes of the battle. They rise and fall; they are heavy and must be supported. But no mention is made of the rod in those hands. Trying to visualize the battle, the reader's imagination falters: is there a rod in his hands, as they rise and fall, or not? At any rate, we have seen this rod for the last time until the moment of our narrative forty years later, when Moses is again commanded, "Take the rod…"

In comparing the two events, we are struck by the fact that both rock-water sites are named Merivah ("dispute"), although they are clearly located in different places[21] and the incidents took place at different times. Aside from God's instruction in the first narrative to strike the rock, we also notice the impersonal, factual tone of God's words there. In the second narrative, God address Moses and Aaron by name, emphasizing their relationship; they are to address the rock "before the eyes of the people," and with an awareness of their perspective; the rock is personified ("it will give forth its waters"), while Moses will be animated by the intention of providing water *for them*; he will personally give them (and their cattle) to drink. Subtly, God's language animates the inanimate, the rock and the water, drawing a contrast with both Moses and the people.

As for the rod, it is once again in Moses' hand, in this different place and time. Where has it been in the interim? The text notes that "Moses took it from before the presence of the Eternal, *mi-lifnei Adonai*" (Numbers 20:9), presumably referring to the Ark located in the Holy of Holies.[22] In effect, this suggests that in the intervening thirty-eight years since the first rock-water episode, the rod had been lodged "in the presence of the Eternal." Like the jar of manna, which was stored "in the presence of the Eternal, as a memento for your generations" (Exodus 16:33), the rod is also described as stored "as a memento in the presence of the Eternal" (Numbers 17:25)—removed from active use, as a significant memento of the people's history.

Meshekh Ḥokhmah[23] suggests that "as a memento" (*l'mishmeret*) implies that the object is suspended from its normal usage within time and space, in order to sacralize its miraculous status. As soon as the tabernacle was erected in the second year in the wilderness, both the jar of manna and the rod were laid in storage "before the presence of the Eternal" (although the manna would continue to sustain the people until the end of the wilderness period). The act of preserving a specimen for future generations demonstrates the miraculous status even of the manna, which would continue to be in daily use, so that familiarity would not breed contempt.[24]

The manna is thus represented as occupying a paradoxical space in the lives of the people. It is to be a part of life in nature and in time—collected and consumed daily—and yet, by being preserved for the future, the manna "in the presence of the Eternal" also becomes a symbol of the starkly miraculous. Poised between nature and miracle, it is already absent: a keepsake for the generations, even as it continues to fall daily upon the camp.

Like the manna, the rod is laid away as a symbol of the miracles of the Exodus.[25] The rod comes to represent an early period of powerful and miraculous divine interventions into the natural order. Until God tells Moses to "take" it in the second rock-water narrative, it has been retired from active service; it has become a museum piece. What were its original characteristics? In what situations had it been used? And how do the associations of these historical moments impact on one another in memory?

The Posture of Trust

In the first rock-water story, God instructs Moses: "Pass in front of the people" (Exodus 17:5).

Rashi's comment to that verse subtly deflects our first reading of God's words:

> "Pass in front of the people"—and see whether they stone you! Why have you spoken slander against My children?
> "And your rod, with which you struck the river"—What is the force of the words, "with which you struck the river"? They are apparently superfluous. But they were added because the Israelites had said of the rod that it was intended only for punishment. By the rod, Pharaoh and the Egyptians had been stricken with many plagues in Egypt and at the Sea of Reeds. Therefore, it is said here: "Take the rod, with which you struck the river"—they shall see now that it is effective also for good.

As Rashi tells the story, a tense drama of fear and suspicion is being enacted between Moses and the people. Moses has, in fact, just expressed his fear of being stoned by them. To this God replies, "Pass before them! You are slandering them by speaking of them as a lynch mob!" What will happen if Moses passes unprotected in front of them? They will witness a benevolent use of that rod that heretofore had been used only to "strike"—that is, to plague the Egyptians. This rod, in other words, is fraught with punitive, destructive meaning, bringing death and suffering to the Egyptians. As soon as the Israelites see that the rod can be an instrument of benevolent (and not only destructive) power, their aggression will abate.

In this midrashic reading, God reproaches Moses for "slandering the people." At first, he is paralyzed in a posture of fearful antagonism, facing a people for whom the rod has only one set of associations. These obvious punitive associations are now to be inverted; the rod will act beneficently, giving life-sustaining water rather than turning water into deathly blood. The familiar rod of the plagues suddenly becomes uncanny. Imbued with memories of the past, the rod is now destabilized. Apparently, a rod is not always a rod. Implicitly, Moses' relation to the people is affected by this old-new usage of the rod. In effect, God is teaching Moses how to shift the people's traumatic associations, and how to evoke in them a measure of trust.

When Moses then goes up to the hilltop to oversee the battle against Amalek, he announces that the rod of God will be in his hand. And yet, as we have noticed, the rod seems to disappear from the narrative. Like the conductor of an orchestra, Moses seems to conduct the progress of the battle…but where is the conductor's baton? Does he conducts with bare hands? Moses' hands are heavy, so he is seated on a stone and Aaron and Hur support his hands: "And his hands were *emunah* until the sun set" (Exodus 17:12).

The description is dense with physical detail, haunted by hands, so that we feel the strain involved in holding the position that will bring his people victory. "His hands were *emunah*"—simply translated, this means that his hands held steady, so that the people prevailed. But Rashi shifts the drama from the physical to the spiritual plane: "Moses held up his hands outspread toward the heavens in faithful and constant prayer." The steadiness of his hands becomes an expression of a difficult posture of the soul, the posture called *emunah*—faith, trust, stability—which is the characteristic of true prayer.

A tableau is enacted in which Moses prays with his hands outstretched toward the heavens. But if we are to visualize the scene in this way, where is the rod? Ramban treats the question in all seriousness, asserting that Moses went up the mountain so that he could see the people in battle and "look upon them in benevolence." They will then see him absorbed in seeing them, spreading his hands heavenward and praying; as a result, they will trust him and will be filled with courage. But in this case, at the moment of prayer with hands outstretched, Moses cannot be holding anything in his hands.

The very nature of prayer and of *emunah* precludes the use of the rod. Ramban suggests that the rod was raised to bring down destruction upon the Amalekites, in the same way that it had been raised to bring plagues upon the Egyptians. In spite of its recent conversion to beneficent purpose in the Merivah story, the rod is clearly an instrument of violence, and violence is no stranger in

battle. But the essential role of Moses in this narrative is to discard the rod and spread his hands in prayer. It is the vulnerable open hand, held high, that brings victory to the people.

What is the connection between Moses' hands and the people's triumph? Do his hands hold magical power to determine the fortunes of war? The question is raised in a well-known mishnaic passage:

> Did Moses' hands really make the fortunes of war or break the fortunes of war? Rather, this comes to teach that as long as Israel was looking upward and submitting their hearts to their heavenly Progenitor, they would prevail; but if not, they would fail.[26]

If Moses' hands do not have magic power, what role do they play? According to this midrash, victory in battle depends on the spiritual attitude of the people, on their hearts' connection with God. Another midrashic passage, however, shifts the emphasis: "As long as Moses held his hands high, Israel would gaze at him and trust (*ma·aminim*) in the One who commanded Moses to do this. And because of this, God performed miracles and prodigies for them."[27] Here, the people's hearts are affected by the position of Moses' hands. By gazing at him as he prays, they are led to their own place of *emunah*. Moses' hands are thus the visual link between the people and God.

Who, then, is Moses for the people? In the moment of *emunah*, seeing him evokes for them their own spiritual possibilities. What this moment costs is implied in the human heaviness of his hands, in his need for support, and in the discarding of the rod, with its well-practiced gestures of authority and confidence. But when they look at him, the people instinctively replicate his posture: "When he kneels, so do they; when he prostrates himself, so do they; when he stretches his hands to heaven, so do they. Just as the prayer leader prays, so too does the whole people pray after him."[28]

This is a radical description of the mimetic relation of Moses and his people. Moses is to pray from a position where he can be seen; the spiritual life of his people is attuned, in some sense, to his. "Before their eyes," he goes through the gestures of humility and trust in the presence of God. An intimate and personal prayer experience thus becomes a visual and spiritual focus for others. In the context of the battle, Moses and the people are engaged in two incompatible processes: the people's hands and eyes are involved in waging war, while at the same time they are fixed in mutual absorption on Moses and imitating his prayer gestures. Moses holds the rod of power and violence, while at the same time his hands are outstretched in the posture of one who grasps at nothing.[29] It is the open-handed posture of the caress: tender and tentative, yet attentive.

Such a tableau, the midrash concludes with astonishing aplomb, is the model for every prayer community. The work of souls who attach themselves to a leader and, like children, repeat prayers after him, is done in the very midst of the cut and thrust, the ambitions and drives, of life. It is as if, in prayer, all of one's competence is disarmed, and one allows oneself the dangerous vulnerability of trust.

In this narrative, Moses' hands, either with or without the rod, come to represent a dynamic epiphany of connection with God; hands high or low, Moses' figure becomes an object of intense suggestiveness for those who see him. Their position brings power (*g'vurah*) to his people, or to their enemies. The final stable position of his hands becomes an icon of faith, which will conserve for the future an early moment of private and collective experience.

Therefore, some forty years later when God tells Moses to "take the rod," the earlier moment of *emunah*, encompassing the first rock-water episode, flickers into potent life. This time, however, the staff fails to ignite *emunah*. Moses fails to find the posture that will make sense of this later moment. The space between himself and his people and the rock remains unsanctified. And God responds: "Because you did not trust in Me, to sanctify Me before the eyes of

the Israelites, therefore you shall not lead this congregation into the land" (Numbers 20:12).

The remembered moment when Moses looked in love at the people looking at him (as Ramban puts it) is later suffused with a kind of "aura." Robert Alter describes Walter Benjamin's use of this term: "an object imagined is felt to have numinous value, an effect of the sacred, because it is steeped in memory."[30] A form of personal revelation, the moment holds a "potency of the truth" that has to be recuperated in the later time. For Benjamin, the aura is associated with involuntary memory, originating in the unconscious and capable of endless epiphanies: "For an experienced event is finite," Benjamin writes in his essay on Proust, "at any rate, confined to one sphere of experience; a remembered event is infinite, because it is *only a key to everything that happened before it and after it*."[31]

The Plagues: Blows on the Heart

Suffused with associations, the early rock-water episode is remembered by Moses when rod and rock again come together. We are not, I suggest, thinking only about two texts, two narratives separated by time and space, and marked by similarities and differences. We are thinking about the way the earlier narrative becomes fraught with memory in the later moment. The Torah itself gently reminds us of this linkage between moments by introducing a flashback into a yet earlier narrative: God's earlier reference to the rod describes it as "with which you struck the river" (Exodus 17:5). In a regressive series, each appearance of the rod evokes the associations of an already extinct past.

The plagues (*makkot*), for instance, begin with a literal *makkah*, a "blow" of the rod that turns the Egyptian river into blood. This most concrete act of violence resonates with unconscious meanings. Fish die and stink in the river. Here, by means of the rod, water becomes blood; later, rock will become water. Here, blood seeps uncannily

through the trees and the stones in all the land of Egypt; later, the water will spill straight into the thirsty mouths of the people. Death and life, liquid and solid, soft and hard, desire and disgust, voluntary and involuntary—sensory images of the first plague are mirrored and transformed in the miracle at Rephidim.

On another level, unconscious meanings cluster around the issues of power and authority: Moses strikes and "kills" the sacred river, which is Pharaoh—who is his father, and who holds the power of life and death. Such aggression is bound up with terror. When God later refers to the rod at Rephidim, a process of transformation is initiated—generating life.

The primal horror of the bloody river in the end achieves nothing: "And Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he did not listen to them.... He paid no heed even to this [literally: 'did not take it to heart']" (Exodus 7:22–23). Pharaoh's heart remains unaffected by the blow of Moses' rod. Ultimately, all the plagues (*makkot*)—all the blows (*makkot*) of Moses' hand and rod, whether physical or gestural—are aimed at Pharaoh's resistant heart. The adjectives *kaveid*, *ḥazak*, and *kasheh* repeatedly convey a sense of the stiffness, hardness, and density of this heart. Impenetrable and unimpressible, this heart is to be battered into submission. One might say that this heart, imagined as a tactile organ, looms over the text—as though contemplating this powerful, perverse organ can provide the Israelites with ways of thinking about other things, such as their own hearts.

Time and again, Pharaoh's heart tightens and closes against the impact of God's hand, often represented by Moses' hand. Before the seventh plague, hail, God has Moses tell Pharaoh: "This time, I am sending all of My plagues against your heart" (Exodus 9:14). In Rashi's reading, God is here referring to the final plague, the ultimate blow: the death of the firstborn, in which will be contained the cumulative terror of "all My *makkot* (plagues/blows)." Will the Egyptians acknowledge the terrifying impact of God's words upon their hearts? Will they "take to heart" Moses' warning and protect

their servants and livestock from the hail by bringing them indoors (Exodus 9:21)?

What is clear, however, is that all these blows—up to, and possibly even including,[32] the final concentrated blow—do not penetrate Pharaoh's heart. Ramban suggests that the bombardment of plagues has a perverse effect: Pharaoh is afraid and clenches his heart ever more tightly.[33] In other words, these *makkot*, these blows of hand and rod, are not simply a series of events. They act dynamically within Pharaoh's memory, altering the field at every stage. Pharaoh's history is one of increasing intransigence; such histories too lie within the human range.

Seeing and Believing

At the same time, Moses too lives with the clusters of memories aroused by his rod. His attack on the river takes its license from a still earlier narrative, his first encounter with God at the burning bush. There, God had announced the divine scenario of redemption, which included the condensed narrative of the plagues: "I will stretch out My hand and smite Egypt with all My wonders that I will work in their midst; after that, he [Pharaoh] will let you go" (Exodus 3:20). In this projected future, Moses is to play an essential role. As God's emissary, Moses will effectively[34] liberate the people from Egypt: "Go, I will send you to Pharaoh and you shall free My people, the Israelites, from Egypt" (Exodus 3:10).

In a real sense, he is to be the redeemer. Moses protests: Who am I? Who shall I say sent me? God answers, and Moses listens in silence to God's scenario of redemption—consisting of nine verses in the Torah text. At the end of God's speech, Moses protests with considerable force: "Then Moses spoke up and said, 'But they will not believe me; they will not listen to my voice. They will say: God did not appear to you'" (Exodus 4:1). God then responds with two signs: Moses' rod is transformed into a snake and then reverts to its original

form, and his hand becomes leprous and also reverts to its previous status:

> The Eternal said to him, "What is that in your hand?" And he replied, "A rod." God said, "Cast it on the ground." He cast it on the ground and it became a snake, and Moses fled from it. Then the Eternal said to Moses, "Put out your hand and grasp it by the tail"—whereupon he put out his hand and seized it, and it became a rod in his hand—"that they may believe that the Eternal, the God of their ancestors—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob—did appear to you." (Exodus 4:2–5)

The rod is introduced as the first of the "signs" that God offers in response to Moses' protest. At this crucial point, Moses' doubts surge from the depths of his being. This time, they cannot be resolved by God's words alone. Moses' body has to deliver a sign that will affect the people's belief in him and in his narrative. Or, in a larger sense, the sign will affect his own belief in the people's belief in him and in his narrative. The reflexive nature of Moses' protest implicates him in his skeptical description of the people: "They will not believe me!" The nexus between him and the people will fail: they will not trust him, and he will be incapable of arousing trust. In the face of God's assurance ("They will listen to your voice," Exodus 3:18), he cries out, "They will not listen to my voice!" Moses' complaint implies that he will be incapable of conveying, by voice or words, a credible narrative of revelation.

Indeed, a passage in the Talmud diagnoses the leprosy that afflicts his hand in the second sign as a punishment for suspecting the innocent. God praises the Israelites as "believers, children of believers."[35] Ostensibly it is *their* faith (or trust) that is at issue here, but it is *Moses* who requires signs, indications that will allow him to trust them! As the Talmud puts it, the people's faith is amply proven, since the Torah vouches for them: "He performed the signs before the eyes of the people, and the people believed" (Exodus 4:31). God

gives the people credit for *emunah*. Moses, on the other hand, must undergo experiences in which his body becomes an instrument of *emunah*, capable of eliciting *emunah* in the people.

At the burning bush, God asks Moses, "What is that in your hand?" (Exodus 4:2)—and the reader is thus led to see the rod in Moses' hand. Perhaps, as Rashi suggests, God is drawing Moses' attention to the *thing* in his hand: do you acknowledge that it is a rod? Moses names it, only to have it transformed into a snake. In other words, Moses is being made aware that his own understanding of things is limited: his names turn out to be inadequate or provisional. Forms will change and new names will have to be found. The rod—the extension of the power of his own hand, more potent, more effective—is transformed into a sinuous, uncanny creature that turns against him: "And Moses fled from it" (Exodus 4:3). After the snake reverts to a rod in his hand, God's attention turns to that very hand: "Put your hand into your bosom" (Exodus 4:6). When he removes it, his hand is "encrusted with snowy scales" (Exodus 4:6).[36] In and out again, and it reverts *ki-v'saro*, into the vulnerable, soft flesh that signifies life.

After each of the signs, God speaks of *emunah*, the effect of the sign on the people's belief. They will believe the first sign, God says. If they don't believe the first sign, they will believe the second. And if they believe neither, if they don't listen to Moses' voice, then he should pour water from the river, and it will turn to blood. Strangely, God's stance in relation to the people's belief seems to shift: the first sign will produce belief; but if it fails, the second will succeed; but if they both fail, Moses should perform the water-blood transformation (which is not called a "sign"), but God does not promise that it will affect the people's belief. Assurances turn into contingency plans, which turn into acknowledgment of possible failure.

Perhaps this indicates that the underlying issue is Moses' faith in the people's faith. The first two signs offer an opportunity of moving Moses to that faith. In both cases, his bodily integrity

and his confidence in his own knowledge of things are shaken. Transformations rapidly affect him: life and death switch places, and then switch back again. There is fear, and recoiling from his own alienated body. In the end, there is just his own flesh: vulnerable, impressible, volatile; a reminder of the existence of others and of the mutuality of flesh. The messages that are the "voice of the sign" (*kol ha-ot*, Exodus 4:8) are not magical effects, but rather human meanings transmitted by a messenger who is himself the instrument of *emunah*.

Suckling Moses

If it is indeed Moses who is, at least in part, the target of the signs, then the experience of transformation resonates with a sense of isolation that is part of his narrative from its earliest days. His life begins in a world that wants him dead. Set adrift by his mother in the Egyptian river, he is taken into the bosom of the Egyptian princess, who is persuaded by his sister to hire a wet-nurse from among the Hebrews—his own mother, in fact—to nurse the baby "for her." The fact that Moses is nursed by his own mother appears to be a deceptively "normal" situation. But it is fraught with history, its meanings complicated by power relationships: his mother has been hired by the princess to nurse the baby "for her."[37]

The Torah pays great attention to the arrangements for Moses' nursing, as though to convey the deep structure of Moses' formation, the ways in which the earliest experience of nurturing may be registered and enriched in memory by unconscious imagination. To suckle a child is to be an *omenet*, one who offers a first encounter with a loving, trustworthy world. *Omenet* comes from the same Hebrew root as *emunah*; the notions of trust, faith, and solidity are embodied in the primal human connection of the infant with its nursing mother. However, that word is never used in this narrative. If *emunah* is a recurring theme in the early narratives we have looked at, it is significantly absent in this explicit description of the

nursing relationship. Here, the physical facts may be secondary to the emotional grounding that is signified by them. Moses is born into a world of genocide and then nurtured in an equivocal setting, situated between two worlds. The confirmation of being, so simply achieved by others, does not quite happen for him.

In this vein, when the infant Moses cries in his box in the river, one midrash hears in his sobs a kind of unconscious solidarity with his suffering people: "She opened [it] and saw there was a child—behold! a boy (*na·ar*) crying" (Exodus 2:6). Since *na·ar* is an unusual term to apply to an infant (as it usually designates a "youth"), *Tz'ror Ha-mor* relates the word to another verse: "Israel is a na·ar and I love him" (Hosea 11:1).[38] Uncannily, the baby's voice is thickened by the pain of his people.

A better-known midrash speaks of Moses' nursing history. It was only after many Egyptian wet-nurses had tried—and failed—to nurse the infant Moses that his own mother was hired. However, this baby refused to nurse (*lo yanak*), detaching himself from those breasts—because his mouth was destined to speak with God.[39] Such a precocious awareness of destiny complicates intimate connections. In this history, weaning precedes nursing. Communication with the world will never be straightforward; there will be impediments to Moses' relation with all that is not God.

The Field of Violence

Such layerings of self-experience, extending back in time, create clusters of meaning around voice and mouth, hand and rod. "This rod," God tells Moses at the burning bush, after he has tried in every way to resist his mission, "you shall take in your hand and perform the signs" (Exodus 4:17). Even as it is flesh, this hand is empowered: "And Moses took the rod of God in his hand…'See,' says God, 'all the wonders I have placed in your hand…'" (Exodus 4:20, 21). Moses will return to Egypt, and the people will believe him when he performs the signs "before their eyes" (Exodus 4:30).

But rod and hand are now already saturated with meaning. Rashi's comment to Exodus 4:8, concerning Moses' leprous hand, suggests just how unexpected these meanings may be:

> "They will believe the voice of the latter sign"—As soon as you say to them, "On your account I have been smitten with leprosy, because I uttered slander about you," they will believe you, for they are already familiar with this (i.e., that those who collaborate to harm them are smitten by plagues, like Pharaoh and Avimelekh, who were punished on Sarah's account).

By performing this sign with his hand, Moses will paradoxically be confirming the people's sense of being loved by God, by offering his own painful experience as evidence that those who slander Israel are made to suffer. Rashi converts a simple magical manifestation of power into a message, at Moses' own cost, of validation to his people. For this elaborate message to work, however, it is Moses who will have to find words to frame it. These words—of slander, punishment, affliction—are born in the darkness of Egypt. In order to create trust in his people, Moses will have to speak about his own body with the language of violence and revenge.

In the first memorable event of his life, Moses "goes out" to his brothers: "And he saw their suffering; and he saw an Egyptian man striking a Hebrew, one of his brothers" (Exodus 2:11). In one swift, complex vision of his world, Moses witnesses suffering and violence, the blow (*makkah*) inflicted by one person upon another. Immediately, there is a circumspect glance in all directions, followed by the blow that kills the Egyptian in retaliation. The text relates: "And he turned this way and that, and he saw that there was no man; and he struck down (*va-yakh*) the Egyptian and buried him in the sand" (Exodus 2:12).

Moses' response is described with the same word used of the Egyptian's violence, *va-yakh* (from the same Hebrew root as

makkah). Like the Egyptian, he strikes to kill—in effect, to save his "brother." In Rashi's reading, his circumspect glance takes in the systemic persecution that lies behind this moment, and also the fact that the persecutor has no redeeming potential.[40] The time-gap between Moses' initial glance and his subsequent act represents a judicious inquiry into the justice of his own act of violence. Perhaps Rashi, in the wake of the midrashic traditions he cites, is sensitive to the irreducible fact that Moses' first recorded act is a *makkah*, an act of violence—which mirrors the violent world into which he has emerged.

The second act follows on the following day. This time he protests against the violence among his own kinsmen: "Why do you strike your fellow?" (Exodus 2:13). From the Hebrew slave's response, he realizes that his own killing of the Egyptian is now public knowledge. He fears for his life and flees. The two episodes are clearly linked, as both address the issue of *makkah*, an infliction of fatal bodily harm. The aggressive Hebrew slave sarcastically questions Moses' role as a self-appointed "chief and ruler over us" (Exodus 2:14), terms that imply the power to inflict punishment. Moses did kill the Egyptian in the name of justice; and yet the fact that he uses the same word, *makkah*, when he protests against the Hebrew slave's violence suggests a more troubling awareness.

In a remarkable talmudic comment, Resh Lakish learns from this narrative:

> One who raises his hand against one's friend, even without hitting that person, is called wicked, as it is said, "And he said to the offender [*rasha*; literally, "the wicked one"], 'Why do you strike (*takkeh*) your fellow?'" It does not say, "Why did you strike," but rather "Why *will* you strike?" Even though he had not yet actually struck him, he is called wicked.[41]

The Torah describes as wicked one who is merely about to strike another. This becomes a legal principle: the menacing act of raising

one's hand disqualifies one from giving testimony in a court of law.[42] Such a remark reflects a critical awareness of the nature of human destructiveness. On one level, Moses is justified in killing the Egyptian to prevent the latter from killing the Hebrew; however, the very same impulse of violence (makkah) is, at least in Moses' mind, at work in the fight between the two Hebrew slaves. And this is an impulse that is tainted at its source.

Beyond the world of law, with its nuanced and contextualized licenses to kill, there remains the sense that *makkah* characterizes the field of violence that is Egypt. It implicates all who are born into it, including the Hebrews and even Moses himself, from the moment he ventures out into it. The language of redemption is shot through with destructiveness. In order to liberate Israel and bring them out of Egypt, God inflicts ten "blows" (*makkot*, plagues) on the oppressors. He engages Moses as the divine emissary: in addition to speaking in God's name, Moses is also to raise his hand repeatedly, throughout the unfolding of the plagues as well as at the Sea of Reeds. At the Sea, two different verbs are used (*natah* as well as *ramah*), but the power of the hand that cleaves the water remains palpable. The upraised hand has become a weapon. Much later, Moses records the marches of the Exodus as follows: "The Israelites started out defiantly [literally, "with raised hand," *b'yad ramah*] before the eyes of all the Egyptians" (Numbers 33:3). The meanings of the gesture of a raised hand—swearing an oath, defiance, aggressiveness, destructiveness, even blasphemy[43]—vary according to context, but Resh Lakish's suggestive remark lingers in the mind.

When this characteristic gesture of the Exodus story appears again at Rephidim, in the scene of the battle against Amalek, it undergoes a transformation. Here, Moses wages war by other means; his upraised hand is outstretched in prayer, transformed into *emunah* ("And his hands were *emunah*," Exodus 17:12). The rod is nowhere to be seen. If defiance has become prayer by an extension of the fingers, does this imply a kind of sublimation of primal impulses? By such small adjustments, the body moves into new worlds.

But if the *makkah* is Moses' first significant gesture, it is also to be his last. In the second rock-water episode at Merivah, he both raises his hand and he strikes: "And Moses raised (*va-yarem*) his hand and he struck (*va-yakh*) the rock twice" (Numbers 20:11). The concentrated violence of the moment differentiates it from the first episode at Rephidim. There it had been God who, in the context of a continuous future-tense narrative, commanded Moses to strike. Moses' own act there is presented as a simple act of obedience: "and Moses did so" (Exodus 17:6). At Merivah, in contrast, Moses obeys only until the moment that he takes the rod, "as [God] had commanded him" (Numbers 20:9). After that, even in assembling the people, he speaks and acts with an independence and aggressiveness that is not "as God had commanded." Moses raises his hand and strikes with all the pent-up power that had once split the Sea and rained down death-blows on the killers of his people. Now, the violent power of this hand surges one last time. His life from Egypt onward has come to a dark fruition.

By the Hand of Moses

The history of Moses' hand is complex and layered. Shaped as an instrument of divine anger, it gathers memories of past selves, conserving the experience of particular moments of being. Each memory is itself saturated by previous moments. Revelations from the past cluster around these memories, which flash back like lightning to the beginning, which holds infinite truth. We recall Walter Benjamin on Proust: "For an experienced event is finite…a remembered event is infinite, because it is only a key to everything that happened before it and after it."[44]

The body that holds these memories becomes an instrument of both anger and *emunah*. The Torah was given by the hand of Moses. This metaphor refuses to die; Moses' real hand gives it heft.[45] In a particularly telling moment, when Moses resists all of God's blandishments to become the divine messenger, he ultimately cries

out, "Please, Adonai, send by the hand of the one You will send" (Exodus 4:13)—that is, Moses asks that God make someone else the divine agent. And Rashi's comment to that verse makes his demurral even clearer: "Send by the hand of another whom You will choose as Your messenger! I am not destined to bring them into the land and to be their future redeemer. You have many messengers."

From his first encounter with God, Moses apparently senses that he will not, in any case, complete the mission. God wants him, his hand, his agency—but only for the first part of the journey. This knowledge will be officially revealed to him at the end of the story, after the rock-water narrative at Merivah. But the issues of anger and trust have already crystallized; Moses' hand will not be the hand that will move the people out of the wilderness. Moses knows this, as surely as he already knows the power and powerlessness of his own hand—as though God's decree will have been long in place. What will be enacted forty years later at Merivah will flash back to an original moment of revelation at the burning bush.

With Their Own Eyes

By the time Moses has travelled from the bush to the rock, his rod has been long out of use—lodged "in the presence of God," as a memento for future generations. Fraught with associations that gather up the inner history of Moses and his people, the rod has been retired from active service. Now, many years later, God tells Moses, "Take the rod…and speak to the rock" (Numbers 20:8). Does taking the rod mean striking with it? Or does the rod now gleam with its clustering associations, with the aura that plays around it, a thing become words? Moses is told to take it, to hold it, and to speak before the eyes of the Israelites. This is to be a strictly visual endeavor: Moses and Aaron will speak, and the people will watch them speak. What they say will not enter the people's ears but rather their eyes. An almost theatrical scene is to be played out, in which rod and words affect the people like a new epiphany.

For the people's eyes, too, carry memories going back to the beginning of the story. Precisely this expression, "before the eyes of the people," accompanied Moses' original performance of the signs: "[he] repeated all the words…and performed the sign before the eyes of the people, and the people believed" (Exodus 4:30–31). Very simply, miraculous signs create belief in those who witness them. But the suggestion is always present in such scenes that a theatrical performance may involve illusion. Public testimony to miracles may generate faith; seeing is indeed believing. But as conjurers and faith healers know, the eye sees what it wishes to see.

When, for instance, Joseph imprisons Simeon "before the eyes" of his brothers (Genesis 42:24), this may mean that an illusion is being practiced upon them: behind the scenes, Joseph releases Simeon.[46] God too appears and acts before the eyes of the people: "And God shall come down on Mount Sinai before the eyes of the whole people" (Exodus 19:11). Again, the truth of this revelation is attested by its eyewitnesses. But, at the same time, "before the eyes of the people" also suggests limited perspectives, subjective meanings triggered by visual impressions. Much later, Moses cautions the people about the tenuous nature of things once seen: "Take utmost care…so that you do not forget the things that you saw with your own eyes, and so that they do not fade from your mind as long as you live" (Deuteronomy 4:9). Here, Moses is addressing the new generation who, in fact, did not themselves see the revelation at Sinai; all those whose eyes had literally seen it had by then vanished into the sands. How can this new generation be urged to remember things seen only by others? Perhaps it is precisely in the absence of that visual experience that a deepened inner vision, clusters of memories that reach through the generations, can be evoked. "One who internalizes his learning—*soveir*, working it into one's mind—will not quickly forget."[47] The movement away from concrete vision into the world of thought and memory offers alternative ways of conserving the potency of the past.

Strange Masterpiece

From this point of view, the last words of the Torah open up radical interpretive possibilities:

> Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses—whom the Eternal singled out, face to face, for the various signs and wonders that the Eternal sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his courtiers and his whole country, and for all the great might [*yad*, literally, "hand"] and awesome power that Moses performed before the eyes of all Israel. (Deuteronomy 34:10–12)

The Torah summarizes Moses' career of manifest prodigies and miracles, which were awesome and visible to all. Rashi quotes the Talmud and other sources:

> "For all the great might [hand]"—that he received the Torah in the form of tablets in his hands. "Before the eyes of all Israel"—that he was inspired [literally, "his heart lifted him up"] to break the tablets before their eyes, as it is said, "I smashed them before your eyes" (Deuteronomy 9:17).

Breaking down the categories of power manifested by Moses, Rashi focuses on Moses' hands, which received the stone tablets. These are also the hands that performed miracles in "that great and fearsome wilderness" (Deuteronomy 8:15). But finally these hands manifested their supreme strength "before the eyes of all Israel," when they smashed the stone tablets that they themselves had received.

The power of that act is represented by the power—the shock—inflicted by this midashic narrative. It closes with God acknowledging Moses' act: *Yishar koḥakha she-shibbarta*, "Congratulations that you smashed them!"[48] God affirms and blesses Moses' act of iconoclastic power. This is the true climax of Moses' prodigious life, as he himself

records it: "I smashed them before your eyes" (Deuteronomy 9:17). And God, in this provocative midrash, validates and privileges this act.

This, Rashi suggests, is the crowning moment of Moses' life, as well as the last word of the Torah. Rashi seems to point to the extraordinary courage that Moses displayed in such a public way: "his heart lifted him up." He has no official imprimatur for this heroic act; he shatters his own conscious expectations of himself and of God. Moses braves the gaze of all those eyes to shatter the concrete, "permanent" representation of God's word. Some extraordinary inspiration raises him above normal considerations to commit this most violent act, and God celebrates the iconoclastic moment.

Moses' heart and hands have here achieved a strange masterpiece. Another midrashic version of the story, however, shifts our impression of the scene. On Moses' narrative in Deuteronomy 9:17, "I seized the two tablets and I cast them out of my two hands, and I smashed them before your eyes," the Jerusalem Talmud reads: "The tablets sought to fly off and Moses seized hold of them."[49] Moses tries with the force of his hands to restrain the tablets as they fly out of his hands, but then apparently yields to their impulse and lets them fly out of his control.

Here, Moses' hands surrender their power in the moment of shattering. Counterintuitively, we are to imagine the force that his hands exerted, seizing hold of the tablets. In smashing the tablets, he paradoxically surrenders control, allowing the tablets to fly! Some unconscious force subverts the mastery of Moses' hands. The tablets wish to fly: what unrecognized longing does the midrash intimate here? The imagery sets heaviness, hardness, and the will to preserve God's words engraved forever on a thing of stone, against lightness, movement, and the thrust of life—that is, the fluidities of oral memory.

The Hand That Writes

By smashing the tablets, Moses undoes the act of engraving, inscribing, and preserving. Moses' hand is, among its other functions, a hand that writes. At the end of his life, he writes the Torah; earlier, he had written—engraved—the second set of stone tablets. Writing down God's dictation, his hand acts as pen. Accepting the divinely inscribed tablets into his hands, he embraces the act of writing.[50]

Michael Fried has written about the work of writers, painters, and surgeons, all of whom represent and remake the world—dissecting, describing, sometimes disfiguring and causing suffering, even in the interest of recovery. He focuses his discussion on the contrast between the "spaces" of reality and of literary representation, which requires "that a human character, ordinarily upright and so to speak forward-looking, be rendered horizontal and upward-facing so as to match the horizontality and upward-facingness of the blank page on which the action of inscription was taking place."[51]

The power relations of the writer's hand, eye, and subject do, in a real sense, *subject*—throw the subject down, as well as subject the reader—onto the blank page. When Moses raises his hand in Egypt and at the Sea, there is physical pain and terror in the world; bodies are cast down on the ground, laid low. (According to Edmund Burke, the ability to hurt is the hallmark of the sublime.) But Moses' hands are also implicated in the production of the Torah itself. We read these narratives as writing on the page: words that have passed through Moses' hands, representing God's voice. And these hands hold conflicted experience: they are flesh; they have been lifted in prayer, palms spread to heaven. This too has happened before the eyes of the people, moving their bodies and hearts to imitation.

Inscribing, describing, dominating, praying—are Moses' hands open or closed? What has happened to the rod? Is it exchanged for the pen or the chisel? What is it that the people see that affects their hearts? Perhaps Moses' hands surrender one kind of power, as the

people allow Moses' hands to lead them upward to the source of their gesture…as the narrative surrenders its claim to reduce the moment to the *writable*, and to set it down.

Letters Fly Off

The tension inherent in such moments comes to a climax, I suggest, when Moses undoes God's writing on the stone tablets. Moses' hands open and let the tablets fly. This is done before the eyes of all Israel: it responds to and challenges their human desire to confirm the evidence of their senses—to be redeemed from the terrors of time by an object hard as stone, eternally present, inscribed by God personally.

"If the tablets had not been smashed," says the Talmud, "the Torah would never have been forgotten from Israel."[52] Two different readings of this passage are possible: (1) if only the tablets had not been smashed, then the Torah would never have been forgotten; or (2) smashing the tablets made forgetting possible—which has generated the dynamic world of the Oral Law.

Rav Yitzhak Hutner reads the talmudic text in this second way, elaborating on the virtues of forgetting.[53] The life of the Oral Torah begins here. When conscious memory ends, the mind begins to reconstruct. Because of forgetting, a world of interpretation and vital argument springs up. What the people have once seen is immediately forgotten upon the death of Moses: three hundred laws vanish from the national memory until the judge many generations hence, Otniel ben Kenaz, retrieves them through his pilpul, his brilliantly creative interpretations.[54] In the words of the rabbis, "Sometimes, the unmaking (*bittul*) of Torah is its fulfillment."[55]

Memory holds on to what one knows; forgetting or smashing the icons of the past makes it possible to know differently, to access by a different route that which was once simply present. Here is both loss and gain: stability, continuity, things hard as stone are fragmented,

fly off into the air, and draw the human eye upward after them. The sense of the body responding will, in time, turn the eyes and heart upward, participating in the movement of the object, anticipating its trajectory. The eye moves through possible viewpoints, establishing a relationship with what is seen and what is no longer seen.

"Meet it is I set it down," says Hamlet as he seizes his tablets, "that one may smile and smile and be a villain."[56] To "set it down" is to control on the horizontal, on the blank page, the overwhelming impact of human treachery. It is also to remember it forever in this reduced form. To forget it might be to release it to unconscious transformation, elaborating it in a world of diffuse impressions. To set it down, to master it in writing, is to preserve it and to become the curator of experience; to smash it is to restore it to its elements, to pure potential—it is to practice a different kind of learning, internalized and free. Unmaking things, as Susan Stewart argues, perhaps gives value to our making.[57]

So if the survival of the Torah has depended on the organic forgetting of history, Rav Hutner suggests that this has given the Oral Torah its particular dynamism. If Moses' greatest moment was when he smashed the tablets before the eyes of all the people, then an eyewitness report is being invoked to complex ends. The visible, graspable Torah, written by the finger of God, becomes, in an instant, invisible; its letters fly off. The people see the thing unmade, liberated into its elements.

In the Presence of the Rock

At the second rock-water incident, God tells Moses and Aaron to "speak to the rock before their [the people's] eyes" (Numbers 20:8). Once before they had seen sounds: at Mount Sinai, they had "seen the voices" (Exodus 20:15).[58] Something of the power of God's word had affected them with the primal, traumatic impact of vision. Perhaps, suggests the *Meshekh Hokhmah*, now—at the end of the wilderness

time, as the Israelites are about to re-enact the Sinai covenant—God wishes them to re-experience the visionary impact of the word.[59] At Sinai, they had been confronted with its demand. Now, each one will envisage Moses delivering it to unimpressible rock. They will bring themselves to bear on the scene; their eyes will be sanctified by seeing holy words.

However, Moses, because of his anger with the people, calls only on their sense of *hearing*: "Listen, you rebels, shall we produce water for you from this rock?" (Numbers 20:10). Seeing God's message would have generated in the people faith, trust, and intimate connection. But Moses fails to engage their depth-perception of the moment. To see God's words is to bring one's personal presence—both conscious and unconscious—to the scene; it is to be affected to the roots of one's very being by something staged before one's eyes.

But for this to happen, one must have eyes that can see. Such an intensity of vision is evoked in the midrash: "Each person saw himself or herself standing in the presence of the rock."[60] This is a scene of presences: the people are gathered *el p'nei ha-sela*, face to face with the rock. Each person sees his or her own presence in the presence of the rock. Looking at the thing, one endows it with a face; a space is created between two faces. One enhances the rock with one's own life.

The Impressionist Moment

The English psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott calls the space between mother and baby "potential space"; it is electric with fantasy and dream. In this space, mother and baby create each other. Facing the rock, each person experiences him or herself facing the rock.

A similar experience is described by John Berger, who writes of the way that the subject of a painting may, breathtakingly, convince the viewer that it has been seen. The light-energy that is transmitted

through the painted object "is the true subject of the painting."[61] Aglow with what lies behind the apparent, paintings interrogate appearances:

> Every artist discovers that drawing—when it is an urgent activity—is a two-way process. To draw is not only to measure and put down; it is also to receive. When the intensity of looking reaches a certain degree, one becomes aware of an equally intense energy coming towards one, through the appearance of whatever it is one is scrutinizing….The encounter…is a ferocious and inarticulated dialogue. To sustain it requires faith….Every event which has been really painted—so that the pictorial language opens—joins the community of everything else that has been painted.[62]

To sustain this meeting of two symmetrical energies, running between the eye and the work, requires faith, Berger says. In our scene of potential revelation at the rock, the people are to be invited to see, to look hard, with eyes open wide. This, claims *Meshekh Ḥokhmah*, is precisely what Moses fails to do when he urges the people to simply "listen." He is not merely neglecting their eyes; he is, in a sense, obscuring a way of seeing that both requires and generates *emunah*—hence God's pronouncement, "Because you did not trust Me…' (Numbers 20:12).

Strikingly, Berger meditates on this faith-dimension of a painting:

> Paintings are prophecies received from the past, prophecies about *what the spectator is seeing in front of the painting at that moment*…. [A] visual image…is always a comment on an *absence*….Visual images, based on appearances, always speak of disappearance.[63]

In another essay, still more eloquent about the themes that concern us here, Berger amplifies his thinking about the paradox of the visible and the invisible in a work of art. "The Eyes of Claude

Monet" focuses on the sadness in Monet's eyes, which is not merely personal but concerned also with the melancholy that pervades his new Impressionist school of painting. It acknowledges that "visibility itself should be considered flux."[64] The history of painting will never be the same again.

"Impressionism" was the term used to describe an early painting by Monet, "Impression Soleil Levant." In the new painting method,

> …The optical truthfulness and the *objective* vagueness… render the scene makeshift, threadbare, decrepit. It is an image of homelessness….An impression is more or less fleeting; it is what is *left behind* because the scene has disappeared or changed….An impression later becomes, like a memory, impossible to verify.…The new relation between scene and seer was such that now the scene was more fugitive, more chimerical than the seer.[65]

"A new relation between what you are seeing and what you have seen" uncovers the meaning of other lilacs, other water-lilies of one's own experience. "What I want to represent is what exists between the motif and me," Monet affirms.[67]

The impressionist painting no longer invites one into an alcove of changeless time and space. What it shows "is painted in such a way that you are *compelled to recognize that it is no longer there*." The viewer's memories are "often pleasurable…yet they are also anguished, because each viewer remains alone….*Memory* is the unacknowledged axis of all Monet's work. His famous love of the sea…of rivers, of water, was perhaps a symbolic way of speaking of tides, sources, recurrence."[67]

At the end of his essay, Berger singles out a late painting of a cliff near Dieppe. Here, Berger claims, Monet himself misunderstood the nature of his own achievement: he believed that he was interpreting the effect of sunlight as it dissolved every detail of grass and shrub into a cloth of honey hung by the sea. But he wasn't, and the painting

has really very little to do with sunlight. What he was dissolving into the honey-cloth were all of his previous memories of that cliff, so that it could absorb and contain them all.

In his paintings of the water-lilies during the last period of his life, Monet's aim was "to preserve everything essential about the garden….The painted lily pond was to be a pond that remembered all."[68] "More alone than ever before, more ridden by the anxiety that their own experience was ephemeral and meaningless,"[69] painters wish "to save *all*."[70]

Let us now return to the eyes of the Israelites, and to the "impressionist" moment staged by God in front of the rock. This is a scene about to disappear. Like Monet's cliff, the rock is the stone-hard repository of all previous memories of rocks, mountains, and revelations—as well as of hands, eyes, rods, water, blood, and snakes. What is to be done with this resistant but ephemeral object so that it will yield water? What the impressionist painter does, says Berger, is to infuse the seen into a new relationship with what has been seen. This acknowledges that the impression is what has been *left behind*: fugitive, impossible to verify. In this sense, it is "a comment on an absence"; such visual images speak of disappearance.[71]

Of Words and Rocks

"Take the rod," God says, "and speak to the rock before their eyes" (Numbers 20:8). The address is to be before their eyes; the moment of faith will be known in that way of looking that acknowledges the fleetingness of the moment. What they will see is the rock, the rod—the visible objects; but also the act of speaking to the rock. This is to make a visual impression on them. It will absorb and contain all the memories of words, prophecies, commandments, and decrees.

At a later time, the prophet will say: "Behold, My word is like fire—declares God—and like a hammer that shatters rock!"[72] And,

at a still later time, the sages will meditate on this image of a rock, together with their own interpretive activity: "Just as this hammer splits the rock into many fragments, so too does each word that issues from the mouth of God split into seventy languages."[73]

Much later still, Kafka will relate the parable of Prometheus and his rock. He will offer four versions of the myth. The first is the traditional myth: Prometheus is clamped to a rock for betraying the secrets of the gods to men, and the gods send eagles to feed on his liver, which is perpetually renewed. In the second, Prometheus presses himself in agony into the rock until he merges with it. In the third and fourth versions, all the details are forgotten over the course of millennia; everyone grows weary of the story—even the gods, even the angels, even the wound that closes wearily.

What remains after this? What is left behind? "The inexplicable mass of rock. The legend tried to explain the inexplicable. As it came out of a substratum of truth, it had in turn to end in the inexplicable."[74] The substratum of truth underlies all the weariness of time; this is the timeless quality of the inexplicable that will, in Robert Alter's words, "eternally compel urgent questions."[75]

For Berger, Monet's rock is part of the future succession of images that are to be seen with the intense energy of the painter's desire to "save all." The substance of the rock is reduced to a frontier, with light coming from behind it toward one who looks with this visual desire.

We recall Walter Benjamin: "For an experienced event is finite...a remembered event is infinite, because it is only a key to everything that happened before it and after it."[76] Such a remembered event is the scene at Merivah: inexplicable, emerging from a substratum of truth. For the remembering mind, it is a key to everything that came before it and that will follow after it. From Mount Sinai to the rock at Merivah to Kafka's rock, an aura suffuses the vestiges of the sacred. For Walter Benjamin, this aura is the object steeped in memory. For those who stood in the presence of the rock at Merivah, a space was

created in which each individual might see him or herself standing in that fraught presence. Like painters, the Israelites are to learn a way of seeing that involves receiving the revelations of the sacred. To be capable of this receptivity, involuntary memory must be allowed its sway.

"To see is to forget the name of the thing one sees," writes Paul Valéry. Seeing in this way dissolves the rock and the rod into a stream of "impressions." The prophet Ezekiel speaks of change, flux, forgetting, as the marks of redemption: "And I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit into you; I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 36:26). In this vision, the stony heart is an alien presence in human flesh. God's promise of a redeemed reality is to reconstitute the human being as *all flesh*—all impressible, receptive to impressions, responsive to the light-energy coming from behind the visible.[77]

Heart of Stone, Heart of Flesh

In the presence of the rock at Merivah, a critical developmental moment has arrived:

> When a child is small, the teacher hits him and educates him. But when he grows up, he is corrected with words. So, too, God said to Moses: "When this rock was young, you struck it, as it is said, 'And you shall strike the rock' (Exodus 17:6). But now, 'You shall speak to the rock'—recite over it a chapter of Torah and that will produce water from the rock!"[78]

God introduces Moses to a new way of understanding his—and the people's—experience. Instead of regarding his earlier experience with the rock at Rephidim as a precedent for future behavior, he is to regard it as an early stage of the people's development, to be transcended as the child/rock matures. What had once been an

effective teaching tool (namely, striking) is now to be replaced by the use of language. The early memory is not cut in stone; it grows by opening to less concrete impressions. So too: now, in memory—involuntary memory—the rock flashes back to the scene of an earlier self. It has become a holding space, preserving both the integrity of self-experience and the acute sense of transformation. The self has evolved. And the rock registers in imagination as capable of maturing; like the stony heart, it is seen in reverie as softening into flesh. If Moses speaks—a chapter, a law—the rock will, like Monet's cliff, essentially dissolve.

Beyond Miracles

This developmental moment—reciting a chapter of Torah in the presence of the rock—becomes, in the reading of *Ha·ameik Davar*,[79] the central image of the narrative. In this view, the moment of Merivah is to prepare the people for the post-miraculous new epoch, which they are now entering. This fortieth year in the wilderness sees a fading-out of miracles and direct interventions by God in human life. In tune with this process, Miriam's death also means the disappearance of her well, which had provided water for the people throughout their travels. Strikingly, *Ha·ameik Davar* claims that this well was not miraculous: it had become a "natural" resource for the people. When it vanished, this crisis needed to be dealt with in the same way as, in the future, in the Holy Land, the people would deal with crises of drought: by gathering and engaging in the dual activities of learning Torah and praying.

The moment at Merivah is therefore a transitional moment; it is precisely *not* a miracle that is called for here, but rather a natural, organic human response to such situations of drought. Now they are to learn how to reactivate natural water-sources: by engaging in words of study and prayer.

So God tells Moses to speak to the rock. Obviously, the rock cannot hear; Moses is to speak not *with* it but *in its presence*. He

and Aaron are to speak in such a way as to move the people to inner growth and to prayer. In this way, the rock will—naturally, spontaneously—give forth its own, familiar waters. In addition, as a kind of afterthought, God adds: "You shall bring forth for them water from the rock" (Numbers 20:8). In case the "natural" strategy of Torah and prayer does not work to produce water, then Moses will act alone—in the old miraculous manner, using his rod to produce water. But the miraculous is to be only a fallback position; what God really wants is to educate the people about their new post-wilderness lives in the land, and about the practices that will enable them to live organically in a new place and time.

In this reading, the water that emerges from the rock after Moses has struck it twice is, in fact, inferior to the natural resources that he failed to produce. The miracle of the rod is, at this point in time, anachronistic. Moses loses the opportunity to teach the people the natural resources of generative language. His failure, in this view, is not that he did not speak. It is that he spoke—in the rock's presence—words of anger against the people. Instead of apprenticing them to Torah and prayer, he attacked them for their sins: they alone are responsible for the drought. His tone rings with angry scorn: "Listen, you rebels, shall we produce water for you from this rock?" (Numbers 20:10).

The result is that instead of guiding the people toward their own spiritual resources, instead of acting with Aaron, the man of peace, Moses acts alone: he speaks alone as old chagrins overwhelm him. He then performs the old, banal miracle that he remembers so well from the past. The rod, which had long been withdrawn from circulation, is now used not only on the rock but first—symbolically—against the people. In his exasperation, he strikes the people with his words.

In this startling reversal of conventional readings, *Ha·ameik Davar* redefines Moses' failure. It is not that he fell short of a fully splendid miracle, but rather that he overshot the new "natural" mode of a life shaped by words. As *Ha·ameik Davar* puts it, when it came to the moment, he "forgot" the law that he was about to teach the people:

the words of Torah that would inspire them to pray. Forgetting the law is, in classic midrashic sources, associated with anger. Moses finds himself assailed by anger more than once in his life; at such moments, the midrash remarks, he forgets the law. Here, anger drives him off course, effacing the words that might have allowed the people to glimpse a new way of being.[81]

Generating Holiness

If the miracle of the rod has suddenly come to seem hackneyed, the alternative state of dynamic self-awareness—of being drawn by words toward a place of faith and holiness—could have been evoked only by words of a certain kind. *Ha·ameik Davar* describes the desired use of words as "soft," in contrast to the angry, rejecting words with which Moses in fact addressed the people.

In the Merivah moment, then, Moses does speak to the people, but his language "misfires." His speaking was to have a performative power: words of Torah would have given birth to prayer and, in turn, to water from the rock. Language here was to be an act, not describing but transforming reality. Instead, Moses speaks so as to wither possibilities in the bud. As Rambam reads the scene,[82] Moses' scornful speech misrepresents God's words. He "forgets" to address the inner lives of the people, neglecting the dynamic power of Torah and prayer to create a sense of holiness among them.

The Talmud offers guidance on how holiness may be generated: "'And I shall be sanctified in the midst of the Israelites' (Leviticus 22:32)—How is God sanctified in the midst of the people? By speaking words of holiness in public."[83] So God turns immediately to Moses and Aaron: "Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm My sanctity before the eyes of the Israelite people…" (Numbers 20:12). They did not speak words of holiness so as to create faith in the power of those words. Instead, words were wielded as blunt weapons. The people remain unprepared for the gentler, more organic

movements of self-awareness. The miracle that is not God's will drives a wedge between them and the future.

Two-Way Process

The power of language is articulated with great precision by Emerson: "All language is vehicular and transitive, and is good, as ferries and horses are, for conveyance, not as farms and houses are, for homestead."[84] Language as vehicular and transitive: it is designed to move one, not to settle one; like ferries and horses, it "can lead me thither where I would be."[85] The poet takes things as occasions for words, as signs for words. In the presence of the inexplicable rock, words of Torah and prayer might have carried the people into their future lives, already knowing something of their own capacity for transformation. In his reading of the rock narrative, *Ha·ameik Davar* carries us inward, to the impressionable heart of flesh that responds to language.

What, then, is the *emunah*, the faith that has sadly not happened here? The Maharal offers us a key: the experience of *emunah* is the experience of being drawn after God, willingly, by the divine word alone.[86] This experience generates joy. And joy, in turn, demonstrates the existence of *emunah*. Moses is to speak to the rock so that it will transcend its stony nature and be moved in attraction after God. To be attracted to an object is, paradoxically, to be at one's most free, at one's most autonomous.

We remember Berger's artist who discovers the two-way process in which, in one's intense gaze, "one becomes aware of an equally intense energy coming towards one."[87] "To sustain it [this dialogue] requires faith….It is like a burrowing in the dark, a burrowing under the apparent. The great images occur when the two tunnels meet and join perfectly….it is like something thrown and caught." This is the moment of most full and most free being: both receiving and giving in one motion. This is achieved, says Maharal, by language (*dibbur*)

alone, not by main force. With a rock responding freely to words alone, the image will leave its trace on the people's imagination, creating a model for their own inner possibility.

Even rocks can discover their own power of response. Rav Yitzḥak Hutner puts it like this: the miracle of the rock that produces water includes the miracle of its effect on the human soul.[89] In other words, the most miraculous thing is the movement of the soul, in being drawn after God. Other images might have served equally well to express the gift of water, such as heavy rains or deep underground springs.[90] But the image of water from a rock has an intimate resonance for those before whose eyes it is enacted. It speaks to the possibility of a new, more responsive nature opening within them. As in a dream or a reverie, the stony heart gives way to the heart of flesh; an immature child grows to discover the power of language for conveyance. Through language, even a rock may be moved from here to there, from jagged dryness to vital flow. This is the joy of which Maharal writes. He calls it *emunah*: faith, trust, two-way processes that draw and are drawn.

The Inexplicable Rock?

The narrative of the rock at Merivah yields its teaching by negation. After the drama has apparently reached resolution—namely, the thirsty people have drunk their fill—God speaks with words that destabilize everything: "Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm My sanctity before the eyes of the Israelite people, therefore you shall not lead this congregation into the land" (Numbers 20:12).

Ironically, there is perhaps no narrative biblical description of the process of faith and sanctification that conveys as much as this description of its absence. What has *not* happened here is an inward (if collective) process that is evoked most powerfully in its failure. Here, we may say, the inexplicable rock comes to life in the text of the Torah.

The disjunction between the apparently happy narrative and God's dire sentence has mystified and provoked generations of readers. Like Kafka's rock, the story comes out of a substratum of truth in turn to end in the inexplicable. The desire to understand, to make the thing a sign of words, generates interpretations of the meaning of both belief (*emunah*) and sanctification (*k'dushah*). The words, inexplicable in this context, become a thing that entitles us to other words. But in the end the mystery remains, focused precisely on that disjunction between the happy miracle narrative of a first reading and God's words that challenge future readings.

Precisely here in this disjunction, we can trace a kind of closure to the story. The last verse reads: "These are the waters of Merivah, where the Israelites quarreled with the Eternal; through which God was *sanctified by them*" (Numbers 20:13). Much ink has been spilled over these words. The place, it seems, has two names: Kadesh, as it is named at the beginning of the story, and Merivah, the name given at the end of the story: "holiness" and "quarrel." The name Merivah is explained in the last verse of the narrative, but the very last words of the verse revert back to the original, unexplained name of the place: "And God was sanctified (*va-yikkadeish*) by them." By a surprising turn, this place of failures and absences does, after all, achieve a different sanctification. In the urgency of generations of readers to find meaning, there is oblique testimony to a passion for the holy. The place will have retroactively earned its name.

This disjunction, strikingly, is the place where Abravanel[91] finds his key to the meaning of the narrative. In his reading, the central reason for God's decree is not given in this narrative at all. There are repressed narratives that account for the decree: namely, the earlier major failures of Moses and Aaron. (Aaron made the golden calf; he did not resist the people's rebellion and die a martyr's death, in sanctification of God's name. And Moses shares responsibility for the disaster of the spies, insofar as his questions to the spies undermined their faith.) But Abravanel's essential provocative point is that the narrative of the rock is intended to obscure the true etiology of sin

and punishment. If the reader finds the rock narrative of insufficient gravity to account for God's judgment, then this impression is correct: the rock story screens other, graver narratives.

Abravanel is well aware that his idea of repressed meanings is radical. Why would the Torah hide its meanings, split the narrative of sin and punishment, and merge two separate sins—Moses' and Aaron's—into one? Indeed, he offers another example of this dynamic: the death of Aaron's two sons is indeed "explained" in the text: "they offered strange fire, that God had not commanded, before the Eternal" (Leviticus 10:1). But this does not prevent the commentaries from searching far and wide for "other sins" to attribute to Aaron's sons. The existence of these other interpretations indicates that the Torah may have obscured the true cause of the priests' deaths.

Abravanel does not offer a theoretical justification for his idea. However, such displacements, in which a simple, concrete explanation is regarded as a screen for other things, are familiar to us in modern literary and psychoanalytical texts. In the narrated life of Moses or Aaron or Aaron's sons, some preoccupation is being worked through; there emerges an arc that can only be suggested by the immediate objects of the narrative. In such a vision, the reader's search for unequivocal explanations may be misleading. Moses is in the end unfound, unknown. He is both revealed and hidden. In each event of his life, there are "impressions"—that is, things left behind. For the reader, too, there are impressions—such as those left by remembered events, which are "a key to everything that happened before it and after it."[92]

Kenneth Burke writes eloquently of the world of nature that "gleams secretly with a most fantastic shimmer of words and social relationships."[93] The midrashic literature deals with this "impressionist" world of nature and the supernatural.[94] Secretly, the Torah reveals and conceals. Implicitly, its enigmatic stories entitle the reader to read, and to speak.

Ben Azzai is given to us in a luminous midrash as such a reader and speaker:

> Once, as Ben Azzai sat and expounded Torah, fire flared around him. They went and told Rabbi Akiva, "Rabbi, as Ben Azzai sits and expounds Torah, fire flares around him." He went to him and said, "I hear that as you were expounding Torah, fire flared around you." He replied, "That is so." He said, "Were you perhaps engaged in the secrets of the divine chariot?" He replied, "No. I was just threading words of Torah with one another, and then with the words of the prophets, and the prophets with Scriptures, and the words were as joyful as when they were given at Sinai, and they were as sweet as at their original utterance. And were they not originally given at Sinai in fire, as it says, 'And the mountain burned in fire?'" (Exodus 19:18).[95]

Encircled by fire, Ben Azzai teaches in the manner called *doreish* (i.e., in the genre of midrash): interpreting, searching, soliciting the text for its hidden meanings. Word spreads like fire: "Ben Azzai is sitting and interpreting, with the fire flaring around him." Three times the words are repeated, like an incantation. The fire flickers and flares, making all space unstable. To Rabbi Akiva's accusation ("Have you been engaged in forbidden mystical practices?"), Ben Azzai serenely, almost domestically, replies that he is merely threading beads, bringing texts into electric contact with each other. What he is doing is (merely!) remembering, re-enacting the experience of Sinai. His activity generates joy and sweetness: this is the aura that flickers around him, as sweet and joyful as the original fire of revelation.

What Ben Azzai is doing is no mystery, he says. As in the Maharal's account of *emunah*, he is being drawn into the otherness of God's words and, at the same time, he is drawing together the separate beads—out of context—into fiery new chains of meaning. This, he says, is sweetness and joy: the two-way process of human and divine energies meeting, so that something emerges from behind the appearances, becomes visible, and rejoices.

NOTES

[1] See Lon L. Fuller, *The Morality of Law* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969).

[2] Sifra, *Sh'mini* 12:3.

[3] See Ramban to Leviticus 19:2. Ramban focuses on the higher sensibility of holiness that transcends minimal legal requirements. For a more detailed treatment of Ramban's commentary on this verse, see the essay by Yitzchak Blau elsewhere in this volume.

[4] Ovadiah ben Jacob Sforno (c. 1475, Cesena [Italy]–1550, Bologna) was one of the greatest medieval commentators on Scripture.

[5] Sifra, *K'doshim* 1:1.

[6] See ibn Ezra to Numbers 20:6.

[7] See Numbers 14:10ff., 16:19ff., and 17:7ff.

[8] At the close of Deuteronomy, the failure to sanctify God is spelled out again, just before Moses' death: "…because you did not sanctify Me in the midst of the Israelites" (Deuteronomy 32:51).

[9] Hayyim ibn Attar (1696–1743) lived in Morocco and the land of Israel.

[10] *Or Ha-ḥayyim* to Numbers 20:8.

[11] See Ramban to Numbers 20:7.

[12] In psychoanalytic parlance, this process is similar to identification: "I am [not] a rock."

[13] Maimonides, *Hakdamot Ha-Rambam La-Mishnah*, ed. Yitzhak Shilat (Jerusalem: Yeshivat Birkat Mosheh, 1992), ch. 4, p. 240.

[14] See Elchanan Samet, *Iyyunim B'farshiyyot Ha-shavua: Vayikra-B'midbar-D'varim*, Second Series (Yeshivat Birkat Moshe: Maaleh Adumim, 2005), pp. 254–255.

[15] Ramban reads Korah's rebellion as an immediate offshoot of the narrative of the spies, and therefore as happening in the second year in the wilderness.

[16] Rashi to Deuteronomy 34:5.

[17] Rashi to Deuteronomy 34:6.

[18] See B. Sotah 14a.

[19] The law of the red heifer is called a *ḥok* (or *ḥukkah*): the quintessential pure decree, resisting normal rational inquiry.

[20] *Yalkut Shimoni* §759.

[21] The first narrative takes place near *Ḥorev*, at Rephidim; the second near Edom, on the plains of Moab.

[22] Cf. Numbers 17:25. If this rod is identical with Aaron's rod which flowered in the Koraḥ narrative, its history becomes more complicated. I intend here to focus on the history of Moses' rod (called "the rod of God") as it appears in the miracle stories in Exodus and in Numbers 20.

[23] Meir Simhah Hakohen of Dvinsk (Eastern Europe, 1843–1926); see comment to Exodus 16:33–34.

[24] The *Meshekh Ḥokhmah* cites Mekhilta, *Va-yissa* 6:3; and Rambam, *Guide for the Perplexed*, II 29.

[25] See B. Horayot 12a.

[26] M. Rosh Hashanah 3:8.

[27] Mekhilta, *B'shallaḥ* 1 (to Exodus 17:11).

[28] Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer (ed. Warsaw, 1852), p. 44.

[29] See Ramban to Exodus 17:9: "While he was praying with his palms outstretched to heaven, he grasped nothing in his hands."

[30] Robert Alter, *Necessary Angels: Tradition and Modernity in Kafka, Benjamin, and Scholem* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 104.

[31] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken, 1969), p. 204; emphasis added.

[32] Even including the plagues at the Sea of Reeds. See *Or Ha-ḥayyim* to Exodus 11:9 for a psychological reading of Pharaoh's intransigence.

[33] See Ramban to Exodus 7:16.

[34] See Rashi's comment to the verse: "Your words will be effective in liberating them."

[35] B. Shabbat 97a.

[36] This is the NJPS translation.

[37] See Exodus 2:7 with its repetition of the word *lakh*, "for you."

[38] Abraham Saba (1140–1508), who lived in Spain, Portugal, and Morocco; here, he cites a midrash that is found in *Torah Sh'leimah* §51.

[39] B. Sotah 12b.

[40] Rashi to Exodus 2:12: "He saw what he had done to him at home and in the field….He saw that no future proselyte would be born of him."

[41] B. Sanhedrin 58b.

[42] See the comment of Rema on Shulhan Arukh, Ḥoshen Mishpat 34:4; and also Torah *T'mimah* to Exodus 2:13.

[43] See Numbers 15:30.

[44] Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 204.

[45] See, e.g., Rashi to Numbers 17:5: "'As God spoke by the hand of Moses'—in the same way as Moses was afflicted with leprosy." The dead metaphor is transformed into a specific moment of memory and judgment.

[46] See Rashi to Genesis 42:24.

[47] Y. Berakhot 5:1.

[48] See B. Shabbat 87.

[49] Y. Taanit 4:5.

[50] Moses is classically identified as the *m'ḥokeik*, "engraver" or "law-maker"; see Rashi to Deuteronomy 33:21, as well as B. Bava Batra 15a.

[51] Michael Fried, *Realism, Writing, Disfiguration* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 99–100. See also Gillian Beer, *Open Fields: Science in Cultural Encounter* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 14–15.
[52] B. Eiruvin 54a.
[53] *Sefer Paḥad Yitzḥak—Ḥanukkah* (Brooklyn, NY: Mosad Gur Aryeh, 1984), p. 36.
[54] B. Temurah 16a.
[55] B. Menaḥot 99b.
[56] *Hamlet*, act I, scene v, line 108.
[57] See Susan Stewart, *The Poet's Freedom: A Notebook on Making* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), pp. 1–2.
[58] See Rashi to Exodus 20:15, s.v. ro·im et ha-kolot.
[59] Meir Simḥah Cohen of Dvinsk, *Sefer Meshekh Ḥokhmah* (ed. Riga, 1927), p. 297.
[60] B'midbar Rabbah 19:5.
[61] John Berger, *Keeping a Rendezvous* (New York: Pantheon, 1991), p. 129.
[62] Ibid., pp. 129–130.
[63] John Berger, *Sense of Sight* (New York: Vintage, 1975), pp. 206–207.
[64] Ibid., p. 189.
[65] Ibid., p. 191.
[66] Ibid., p. 193.
[67] Ibid., p. 195.
[68] Ibid., p. 196.
[69] Ibid., p. 196.
[70] Ibid., p. 195.
[71] Ibid., p. 207.
[72] Jeremiah 23:29.
[73] B. Shabbat 88a.
[74] Franz Kafka, *Parables and Paradoxes* (New York: Schocken, 1961), p. 83.
[75] Alter, *Necessary Angels*, p. 92.
[76] Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 204.
[77] Samson Raphael Hirsch, commenting on Genesis 2:21, connects *basar*, "flesh," with the verb *l'vasseir*, "to announce, proclaim," suggesting that "the human body is the herald of the spirit to the world"; it brings consciousness of the world and is the medium of impact on the world. See Hirsch, *The Pentateuch*, trans. Isaac Levy (London: Isaac Levy, 1959), vol. 1, p. 68.
[78] *Yalkut Shimoni* §763.
[79] Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin (1816–1893; also called the Netziv); *Ha·ameik Davar: Torat Elohim* (Jerusalem: Chemed, 1975), vol. 4, pp. 174–175.
[80] Miriam's well is listed among the ten things created at twilight on the Shabbat eve of creation (Pirkei Avot 5:8). These last-moment creations occupy

a transitional space between the natural and the miraculous.
[81] Sifra, *Sh'mini* 60:2 (to Leviticus 10:20).
[82] *Hakdamot Ha-Rambam La-Mishnah*, p. 240.
[83] B. Megillah 23b.
[84] Emerson, "The Poet," in *Selected Essays* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), p. 279.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Judah Loew ben Bezalel (1535–1609), *G'vurot Hashem* (Bnai Brak [Israel]: Yahadut, 1982), p. 44.
[87] Berger, *Rendezvous*, p. 130.
[88] Berger, *Sense of Sight*, p. 131.
[89] Yitzhak Hutner, *Sefer Paḥad Yitzḥak—Pesaḥ* (Brooklyn, NY: Mosad Gur Aryeh, 1984), p. 40.
[90] See the comment to Numbers 20:8 by Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg in his *Ha-k'tav V'ha-kabbalah* (ed. Frankfurt, 1880), p. 31a.
[91] Don Isaac Abravanel (1437–1508) to Numbers 20 (ed. Warsaw, 1863), p. 20b.
[92] Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 204.
[93] Kenneth Burke, "What Are the Signs of What? A Theory of Entitlement," in *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), p. 379. See also Richard Poirier, "Frost, Winnicott, Burke," in Peter L. Rudnytsky, ed., *Transitional Objects and Potential Spaces: Literary Uses of D.W. Winnicott* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 216–228.
[94] The kabbalistic idea of the *r'shimu* (literally: the impression, the trace) is a major theme in its world of meanings.
[95] Shir Hashirim Rabbah 1:10.