

Moses at Sinai: God's Partner or Adversary

Part II: Rabbinic Interpretation

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Hartman@Home Shavuot 5780 – 2020

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Intertextuality

Reading our story in light of Proverbs 25:14–15 paints Moses as intercessor.

"Like clouds and wind without rain is one who boasts of a gift never given. With patience a ruler may be persuaded, and a soft tongue can break bones."

ּנְשִׂיאֵים וֻרוּחַ וְגָשֶׁם אָיִן אִישׁ מִׁתְהַלֵּל בְּמַתַּת־שָׁקֶר: בָּאָרַדְּ אַפַּיִם יִפְתֵּה קַצֵּין וְלַשִּׁוֹן רַכַּה תִּשְׁבַּר־גַרָם:

1. Exodus Rabbah 42:1

"The Lord spoke to Moses, 'Hurry down'" (Exodus 32:7). R. Tanhuma b. Abba began: "Like clouds and wind without rain is one who boasts of a gift never given; With patience a ruler may be persuaded, and a soft tongue can break bones" (Proverbs 25:14-15).

Not only did they make an idol, but they also committed immorality and shed blood, for the merry-making (tseḥoq) referred to here (Exodus 32:6) means idol-worship, immorality, and the shedding of blood. Whence do we know that tseḥoq means shedding of blood? Because it says, "Let the young men, I pray thee, arise and play (vayesaḥequ) before us" (2 Samuel 2:14). Whence do we know that it [tseḥoq] also refers to immorality? Because it says, "The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought to us, came in to me to mock me" (letsaḥeq; Genesis 39:17).

[Here follows a lengthy account of Moses' arguments before God on behalf of the Israelites, all of which are refuted by God, and yet in the end, Moses succeeds in turning back God's anger!]

This is an illustration of "clouds and wind without rain." Yet Moses was successful in averting the punishment, a proof that "With patience a ruler may be persuaded, and a soft tongue can break bones" (Proverbs 25:15).

וידבר הי אל משה לך רד - רי תנחומא בר אבא פתח: (משלי כה): נשיאים ורוח וגשם אין...

ולא עבודת כוכבים עשו בלבד, אלא גילוי עריות ושפיכות דמים, ואין שחוק האמור כאן, אלא עבודת כוכבים וגילוי עריות ושפיכות דמים. ומנין לשחוק שהוא שפיכות דמים? שנאמר (שמואל ב ב): יקומו נא הנערים וישחקו לפנינו. וגילוי עריות מנין? שנאמר (בראשית לט): בא אלי העבד העברי לצחק בי וגו...

הוי, נשיאים ורוח וגשם אין. בטל משה מיד את הפורענות. הוי, בארך אפים וגו...

Reading our story in light of Psalm 106 paints Moses as defiant adversary.

Psalms 106:23

"He would have destroyed them had not Moses His chosen one confronted [lit. "stood before"] Him in the breach to avert His destructive wrath."

וּנֹּאמֶר לֶהַשִּׁמִידֵם לוּלֵי מֹשֵׁה בָחִירוֹ עַמֵד בַּפֵּרֵץ לְפַנֵיו לְהַשִּׁיב חֲמַתוֹ מֵהַשְּׁחֵית:

2. Exodus Rabbah 43:1

"But Moses implored the Lord his God" (Exodus 32:11). R. Tanhuma b. Abba began thus: "He would have destroyed them, had not Moses his chosen one confronted Him in the breach to avert [lit. turn back] His destructive wrath" (Psalm 106:23).

What is "stood in the breach before him?" R. Hama b. Hanina said: The good advocate knows how to set himself against the tribunal. Moses was one of two good advocates who arose to defend Israel and set themselves, as it were, against the Holy One, blessed be He. These were Moses and Daniel ...These were the two men who set their faces against the attribute of strict Justice in order to argue for mercy on Israel's behalf.

ויחל משה - כך פתח רי תנחומא בר אבא: (תהלים קו): ויאמר להשמידם לולי משה בחירו עמד בפרץ לפניו. אמר רבי חמא בר חנינא: הסניגור הטוב מסביר פנים בדין. משה אחד משני סניגורין, שעמדו ללמוד סניגוריא על ישראל, והעמידו פנים כביכול כנגד הקב"ה: משה ודניאל. משה מנין? שנאמר: לולי משה בחירו וגוי. דניאל מנין? שנאמר (דניאל ט): ואתנה את פני אל ה' האלהים לבקש וגוי. אלו שני בני אדם שנתנו פניהם לנגד מידת הדין לבקש רחמים על ישראל.

Questions for reflection:

In the previous passages, the rabbis deploy distant biblical passages in order to interpret the gap in Exodus 32. What are some of the linguistic and thematic continuities between the verses from Proverbs and Psalms and the text from Exodus? Is one interpretation more compelling? Why do you think the rabbis mobilize this exegetical technique in approaching the interaction between God and Moses?

Puns or Word Play

"Moses implored" = vayeḥal

The root h.l has the following range of meanings:

- 1. sweet (as in hallah bread)
- 2. profane (as in hol), including to profane or annul (hehal) a vow
- 3. to wear a weapon or gird oneself for war (see modern hayyal = soldier)

Moses as Intercessor or God's Partner

3. Exodus Rabbah 42:9

"Now let me be!" Was Moses holding fast to God that He should say "Now let me be!"? [Of course not, therefore another meaning must be intended.] To what can the thing be compared? To a king who was angry with his son, and had him brought into a chamber and was about to beat him, but then the king cried from the chamber "Let me be, that I may beat him." Now, the instructor [of the son] was standing without and he thought to himself: "If the king and the son are alone within the chamber, then to whom is he saying: 'let me be'? it must be because the king wants me to go in and entreat him on his son's behalf and for this reason he says: 'let me be!" [He is hinting that I have the power or even the permission to prevent him, if I so choose.] Similarly, God said to Moses, "Now let me be!" and Moses inferred, "It is because God wants me to intercede on Israel's behalf"... Thereupon Moses began to plead for mercy on their behalf as its says, "but Moses implored the Lord his God."

ועתה הניחה לי ויחר אפי בהם ואכלם וכי משה היה תופש בהקב״ה שהוא אומר הניחה ליי! אלא, למה הדבר דומה? למלך, שכעס על בנו והכניסו לקיטון ומתחיל לבקש להכותו, והיה המלך מצעק מן הקיטון: הניחה לי שאכנו, והיה פדגוג עומד בחוץ. אמר הפדגוג: המלך ובנו לפנים בקיטון, למה הוא אומר הניחה ליי! אלא מפני שהמלך מבקש שאלך ואפייסנו על בנו, לכך הוא מצעק הניחה לי! כך אמר הקב״ה למשה: ועתה הניחה לי. אמר משה: מפני שהקב״ה רוצה שאפייס על ישראל, לפיכך הוא אומר: ועתה הניחה לי. מיד, התחיל לבקש עליהם רחמים. הוי, ויחל משה את פני ה׳ אלהיו:

4. Deuteronomy Rabbah 3:15

God said to him: "Let not the two of us be angry, but when you see me pour hot [water] you pour cold, and when you see me pour cold, you pour hot." Moses asked: "Ruler of the Universe, how shall this happen?" God replied: "Pray for mercy on their behalf." What did he do? Immediately "But Moses implored the Lord."

אייל הקבייה: לא יהיו שתי הפנים בכעס, אלא כשתראה אותי נותן רותחין, הוי, נותן צונן וכשתראה אותי נותן צונן, הוי נותן רותחין. אמר משה: רבשייע! היאך יהא! אייל: הוי, חל אתה רחמים. מה עשה! מיד, ויחל משה את פני הי אלהיו.

5. Exodus Rabbah 44:4

Moses pleaded: "Lord of the Universe! Why are you angry with Israel?" He replied, "Because they have broken the Decalogue." He said, "Well, they possess a source from which they can make repayment." He asked, "What is that?" Moses replied: "Remember that you tried Abraham with ten trials, and so let those ten [trials serve as compensation] for these ten [broken commandments]." This is why he said, "Remember Abraham, Isaac and Israel" (Exodus 32:13).

אמר משה: רבון העולם! על מה אתה כועס על ישראל! אמר: בשביל שבטלו עשרת הדברות. אמר לו: יש להן מהיכן ליפרע. אמר לו: מנין! אמר: הזכר שנסית אברהם ביי נסיונות, ויצאו עשר בעשר. הוי, זכור לאברהם ליצחק ולישראל:

6. Exodus Rabbah 43:4

Another explanation of "But Moses implored the Lord his God." What does this mean?...That he [Moses] absolved his Creator of His vow. [While one cannot nullify his own vow another can nullify it for one.] How? When Israel made the Calf, Moses began to entreat God to forgive them; but God said: "Moses, I have already taken an oath that 'Whoever sacrifices to a god other than YHWH alone shall be proscribed [destroyed]' (Ex. 22:19) and I cannot retract an oath which has proceeded from My mouth." Moses said to him: "Lord of the Universe! Didn't you grant me the power of annulment of oaths by saying, 'If a man makes a vow ...HE shall not break (yaḥel) HIS pledge' (Num 30:3); that is, he himself cannot break his pledge, but a scholar can absolve his vow if he consults him, and any sage who gives instruction, if he wants others to accept his decision, he should be the first to observe it. Since you have commanded me concerning the annulment of vows, it is only right that you should [seek to] annul your vow as you have commanded me to annul the vows of others." Thereupon [Moses] wrapped himself in his cloak and seated himself in the posture of a Sage, and God stood before him like one asking [for the

annulment of] his vow;... What did he [Moses] say to Him? A hard thing... 'Do you now regret [your vow]?' He said to him, 'I regret now the evil which I said I would do to My people.' When Moses heard this, he said: 'It is absolved for you, it is absolved for you. There is neither vow nor oath any longer'; for this reason does it say: *vayeḥal Moshe* meaning that he absolved (*heḥal*) the vow of his creator...

דבר אחר: ויחל משה מהו כן? אמר ר' ברכיה בשם ר' חלבו, בשם ר' יצחק: שהתיר נדרו של יוצרו. כיצד? אלא, בשעה שעשו ישראל העגל, עמד משה מפייס האלהים שימחול להם. אמר האלהים: משה! כבר נשבעתי (שמות כב): זובח לאלהים יחרם, ודבר שבועה שיצא מפי איני מחזירו! אמר משה: רבון העולם! ולא נתתי לי הפרה של נדרים, ואמרת (במדבר ל): איש כי ידור נדר לה' או השבע שבועה לאסור אסר על נפשו לא יחל דברו, הוא אינו מוחל, אבל חכם מוחל את נדרו בעת שישאל עליו, וכל זקן שמורה הוראה, אם ירצה שיקבלו אחרים הוראתו, צריך הוא לקיימה תחלה, ואתה צויתני על הפרת נדרים, דין הוא שתתיר את נדרך, כאשר צויתני להתיר לאחרים! מיד נתעטף בטליתו וישב לו כזקן, והקב"ה עומד כשואל נדרו... ומה אמר לו! דבר קשה. אמר רבי יוחנן: דבר קשה אמר לפניו: תהית, אתמהא! אמר לו: תוהא אנא על הרעה אשר דברתי לעשות לעמי, אותה שעה אמר משה: מותר לך, מותר לך, אין כאן נדר ואין כאן שבועה. הוי, ויחל משה, שהפר נדרו ליוצרו:...

Questions for reflection:

This is an extreme depiction of God trapped by God's own rules of sin and punishment, needing Moses to cleverly intervene and provide an escape hatch. Does this model of Moses' intercession conform to your own notions of either communal or individual prayer? Is God's dependency on people to save God's self from God's own norms and values more troubling or less troubling than the image of God as an enemy?

Moses as God's Adversary

7. Exodus Rabbah 43:1

He [Moses] stood before God with scant respect in order to request Israel's needs. Hence *veyeḥal* [i.e., he treated him as something profane and not holy].

הוי, ויחל משה את פני הי אלהיו, שעמד בקלות ראש לפני הקבייה, לבקש צרכן של ישראל. הוי, ויחל משה :

8. Exodus Rabbah 44:9

R. Isaac said: Then it was that [God] could give no reply but could only say, "You have argued well." Thereupon, "And the Lord renounced [repented of] the evil He had planned to bring upon his people" (Exodus 32:14).

אמר רבי יצחק: אותה שעה לא היה יכול להשיבו. אמר הקבייה: יפה אמרת! מיד, וינחם הי. אמר לו האלהים: אף הראשונות תהיתי עליהן:

9. Exodus Rabbah 43:1

"And he would have destroyed them." Thereupon Moses girded himself for prayer. That is the meaning of "vayeḥal."

ויאמר להשמידם, מיד התחיל חוגר בתפלה. הוי, ויחל משה את פני ה' אלהיו

10. Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 32a

"Ruler of the Universe, it was the gold and silver that you lavished on Israel till they said "Enough" that caused them to make the molten calf. It was said in the school of R. Yannai: A lion does not roar on account of a trough of straw but on account of a trough of meat." R. Oshaia said: It is like a man who had a cow that was skin and bones. He fed it vetch and it kicked him. He said to her: 'What caused you to kick me? Nothing but the very vetch with which I fed you!'

רבונו של עולם בשביל כסף וזהב שהשפעת להם לישראל עד שאמרו די הוא גרם שעשו את העגל אמרי דבי ר' ינאי אין ארי נוהם מתוך קופה של תבן אלא מתוך קופה של בשר אמר רבי אושעיא משל לאדם שהיתה לו פרה כחושה ובעלת אברים האכילה כרשינין והיתה מבעטת בו אמר לה מי גרם ליך שתהא מבעטת בי אלא כרשינין שהאכלתיך

11. Exodus Rabbah 43:7

Lord of the Universe [consider] the place from which You brought them out — was it not Egypt where everyone worships lambs? R. Huna said in the name of R. Yohanan: "It can be compared to a wise man who opened a perfumery shop for his son in a market frequented by prostitutes... When the father came and caught him with a prostitute, he began to shout: 'I will kill you!' but his friend was there, and he said: 'You destroyed the boy, and yet you shout at him!...' This is what Moses said: 'Lord of the Universe! You ignored the entire world and caused Your children to be enslaved precisely in Egypt, where everyone worships lambs and from whom Your children learned...Bear in mind from where You brought them forth.'"

רבון העולם! מהיכן הוצאת אותם! ממצרים, שהיו כולם עובדי טלאים. אמר רבי הונא בשם רי יוחנן: משל לחכם, שפתח לבנו חנות של בשמים בשוק של זונות.

המבוי עשה שלו, והאומנות עשתה שלה, והנער כבחור עשה שלו, יצא לתרבות רעה.

בא אביו ותפסו עם הזונות, התחיל האב צועק ואומר: הורגך אני! היה שם אוהבו,

אמר לו: אתה איבדת את הנער, ואתה צועק כנגדו?! הנחת כל האומניות, ולא למדתו אלא בְּשָּׁם, והנחת כל המובאות ולא פתחת לו חנות, אלא בשוק של זונות. כך אמר משה: רבון העולם! הנחת כל העולם ולא שעבדת בניך אלא במצרים, שהיו עובדין טלאים, ולמדו מהם בניך, ואף הם עשו העגל. לפיכך אמר: אשר הוצאת מארץ מצרים, דע מהיכן הוצאת אותם:

12. Exodus Rabbah 43:1

R. Shmuel bar Nahman said: "confronted him in the breach." It is rather difficult to say that he [Moses] confronted Him in the breach [implying that Moses used force, as it were, to prevent God from punishing Israel]. It can be compared to a king who was angry with his son, and took his place on the tribunal and tried him and pronounced him guilty. As he took up the pen to sign the verdict of the court, what did his associate do? He snatched the pen from his hand and broke it in order to appease his wrath. Similarly, when Israel committed that sin, God sat in judgment upon them to condemn them... So what did Moses do?... When Israel committed that sin he took the Tablets and shattered them as if to say, had they foreseen the punishment they would not have sinned. Moreover, Moses said: "It is better that they be judged as having done it unintentionally, than as if they had willfully committed the act" [i.e., that they be judged as if they had not yet received the commandment prohibiting idolatry].

רי שמואל בר נחמן אמר: עמד בפרץ לפניו, דבר קשה. משל למלך, שכעס על בנו וישב על בימה ודנו וחייבו. נטל את הקולמוס לחתום גזר דינו. מה עשה סונקתדרו! חטף את הקולמוס מתוך ידו של מלך, כדי להשיב חמתו. כך בשעה שעשו ישראל אותו ישב הקב"ה עליהם בדין לחייבם...מה עשה משה!... כך עשה משה,

כיון שעשו ישראל אותו מעשה, נטל את הלוחות ושברן, כלומר, שאלו היו רואין עונשן לא חטאו. ועוד אמר משה: מוטב נידונין כשוגגין, ואל יהו מזידין.

13. Deuteronomy Rabbah 3:15

"Add to them Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, Ithamar, Phineas and Caleb – that makes 77." God said to him, "But Moses, where are the three remaining righteous men?" Moses could not find them. He then said, "Master of the Universe, if these [righteous] men though alive cannot stand for them [Israel] in the breach, then let the dead do so [meaning the three patriarchs].

אהרן, נדב ואביהוא, אלעזר ואיתמר, פנחס וכלב, הרי שבעים ושבעה. אייל הקבייה: הא משה !היכן עוד ג' צדיקים! ולא היה מוצא. אמר לפניו: רבשייע! אם הללו בחיים ואינם יכולין לעמוד להם בפרצה הזו, יעמדו המתים!

14. Exodus Rabbah 44:8

When Israel committed that sin, five angels of destruction came out to destroy them: Anger (af), Wrath (ketsef), Displeasure (ḥamah), Destruction (heshmed) and Annihilation (hashḥatah)... He said "Lord of the Universe! You take on one while I take on another. You tackle Anger...and I will tackle Wrath (see Ps 106:23)..." God said to him: "See, I have taken on the one and you another; but what will you do with the other three?" Moses replied: "There are the three patriarchs who can tackle the other three." This is why he mentioned them.

: דבר אחר

זכור לאברהם מה ראה להזכיר גי אבות! אמר רבי אלוני בן טברי, בשם רי יצחק: כיון שעשו אותו מעשה, יצאו הי מלאכי חבלה לכלותן: אף, וחמה, וקצף, והשמד, והשחת...

אמר: רבון העולם! אתה עומד באחד, ואני באי, אתה עומד באף, שנאמר (תהלים ז): קומה הי באפך.

ואני בחמה, שנאמר (שם קו): להשיב חמתו מהשחית. אמר לו הקבייה: הרי עמדתי באחד, ואתה באחד, לגי מה תעשה? אמר לו משה: הרי גי האבות עומדין לשלשתן, לפיכך הוא מזכירן:

Deuteronomy 9:19

For I was in dread of the LORD's fierce anger against you, which moved Him to wipe you out. And that time, too, the LORD gave heed to me—.

ּכִּי יָגֹרְתִּי, מִפְּנֵי <u>הָאַף וָהַחֵּמָה,</u> אֲשֶׁר <u>קָצַף</u> יְהוָה אֲלֵיכֶם, <u>לְהשָׁמִיד</u> אֶתְכֶם; וַיִּשְׁמַע יְהוָה אֵלַי, גּם בּפּעם ההוא.

Psalms 106:23

Therefore He said that He would destroy them, had not Moses His chosen stood before Him in the breach, to turn back His wrath, lest He should annihilate them.

לּוּלֵי, מֹשֶׁה בָחִירו עָמַד בַּפֵּרֵץ לְפָנַיו לְהַשִּׁיב <u>חַמתו</u> מַהַשַּׁחִית וַיּאֹמֶר, לְהַשְּׁמִידָם:

15. Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 32a

R. Abbahu said: Were it not written in Scripture, it would not be possible to say it. Moses grabbed hold of God like a man grabs hold of his fellow by the collar [lit. clothing] and said "Ruler of the Universe, I won't let go until you are merciful and forgive them!"

אמר רבי אבהו אלמלא מקרא כתוב אי אפשר לאומרו מלמד שתפסו משה להקדוש ברוך הוא כאדם שהוא תופס את חבירו בבגדו ואמר לפניו רבונו של עולם אין אני מניחך עד שתמחול ותסלח להם

Questions for reflection

The rabbis employ parables and imagery in order to describe the interaction between God and Moses, ranging from a father and son to a master and cow. In this Talmudic passage, the rabbis astonishingly depict Moses as physically restraining God. What is the purpose of using these literary techniques? What other images or parables could you imagine using to describe this pivotal event?

Merging of the Two Models

16. Zohar

Even though He threatens and raises the lash, Mother [Shekhinah] comes and grabs hold of His right arm and the lash his suspended.

The sentence is not carried out, because both of them share one design.

He by threatening, she by holding back his right...

[However, because of the sin] Mother, who always grasps the arm of the King and suspends the lash,

was not there.

Moses had to take Her place.

As soon as the Blessed Holy One penetrated him, he saw clearly.

Three times he penetrated him! O Moses, Faithful Shepherd!

How mighty is your strength, how great is your power.

Three times He penetrated you!

As it is written: "Now leave Me alone!" That is one,

"My anger will blaze against them and I will consume them," that is two.

"And I will make you into a great nation!" that is three.

The wisdom of Moses was in these three points.

He grasped His right arm in response to: "Leave me alone!"

He grasped His left arm in response to: "My anger will blaze against them and I will consume them."

He embraced the body of the King in response to: "And I will make you into a great nation!"

Having embraced the body, both arms on this side and that,

He could not move to any side at all!

This was the wisdom of Moses:

he knew the various points of the King, where to be firm on each one.

He acted in wisdom!

Questions for reflection

The Zohar contains a paradoxical portrait of God adhering to God's own promises of punishment and strict justice, while simultaneously seeking to undermine them. God recognizes that God's strict justice is spinning out of control and hints to Moses to neutralize this destructive capability. What are some of the implications of believing in such a conflicted God, who needs and wants human partnership **and** opposition to undermine divine plans? What are some of the ways in which this conception of God as reliant on the assistance of humans is both useful and problematic in the contemporary moment?





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