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**“TO BLOOM IN EMPTY SPACE”:
AN INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY ON THE PETICHTA TO ESTHER
RABBAH**

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Honors Project in Religious Studies
Advisors: Nicholas J Schaser and Nanette Goldman

Macalester College, Saint Paul, Minnesota
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Abstract

The petichta to *Esther Rabbah* (c. 6th century CE) reflects a pessimistic rabbinic response to the physical and theological displacement of the Jews in an increasingly Christianized Roman Palestine. Using the covenantal curses (specifically Deuteronomy 28 and Leviticus 26) as a frame, the rabbis situate the book of Esther and their current socio-political context into the rabbinic paradigm of the Four Kingdoms, representative of ongoing imperial oppression. According to *Esther Rabbah*, Jews living under Roman rule—even those in Palestine—are living in a state of “exile” characterized by the ongoing impact of the covenantal curses. For the rabbis, Israel cannot flourish as God’s chosen people under these exilic conditions, which will culminate in the kind of state-sanctioned annihilation of Jewry that appears in Esther. The Midrash arrives at this theo-political worldview by reading Esther as a narrative of subjugation to the covenantal curses. In presenting their current oppression as a recapitulation of the oppression suffered in Esther, the rabbis interpret the Torah’s covenantal curses as a necessary precursor to divine salvation under Rome.

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Introduction to the *Petichta to Esther Rabbah*

In his discussion of post-Holocaust biblical interpretation, Emil Fackenheim writes, “Denuded of pious interpretations...Esther adds up to a lesson in monumental good luck—a lesson supremely relevant, supremely painful for a Jewish ‘generation’ after a time of monumental bad luck.”¹ Fackenheim summarizes the heightened relevance of the book of Esther for readers after the Shoah. It is not difficult for modern readers to view the character and actions of Haman—the anti-Jewish villain of the Esther narrative—as the Biblical archetype of Hitler and the Final Solution. Fackenheim is not the first Jewish thinker to highlight Esther’s relevance in the midst of “monumental bad luck”; the rabbis of Late Antiquity also looked to this biblical text to make meaning out of difficult circumstances. Across the various collections of the classical Midrashim, the rabbinic commentators cite and allude to Esther more than any other biblical book.² The rabbis living in a post-Temple and Roman-controlled Palestine clung to Esther’s message of Jewish liberation from state-sanctioned persecution and oppressive imperial rule. Yet, unlike Fackenheim, these rabbis did not consider the events of Esther to be mere “good luck,” however “monumental”; instead, they understood Esther as an example of divine providence preserved in the pages of sacred Scripture. In the following introduction to the *petichta to Esther Rabbah*, I will show how the rabbinic readers of Esther understand both the threat of Persian annihilation and the salvation of the Jews under Persian rule through the framework of the Torah’s covenantal curses and the paradigm of continual

¹ Emil Fackenheim, *The Jewish Bible After the Holocaust: A Re-Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 62.

² It is also the only book treated to a more complete midrashic exegesis in the Talmud. Cf. b. Megillah 11a-17b, See: Aaron Koller, *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 164.

imperial oppression seen in the Four Kingdoms motif that originates in Daniel. *Esther Rabbah* is a collection of homiletic midrash. The *petichta* is the opening chapter of the collection, and dates to around the 6th century CE. In the *petichta*, the rabbis identify their current socio-historical context under a Christianized Roman Empire as a contemporaneous manifestation of the covenantal curses in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. God prescribes the curses for the violation of the covenant: “If you fail to observe faithfully all the words of this Torah that are written in this book... the Lord will inflict extraordinary plagues upon you and your offspring.” (Deut 28:58-59) Accordingly, rabbinic writers in the Land of Israel frame the Jewish experience as both a physical and theological displacement from the Holy Land through the process of Christianization—a situation of Jewish estrangement symptomatic of the covenantal curses. In the rabbinic understanding, the curses will continue to unfold as long as Rome remains in power, and Rome will only fall after a period of violence, or a threat of violence akin to the threat of Haman in Esther. Although the material reality of the 6th century CE was much improved in Palestine from previous centuries, the *petichta* to *Esther Rabbah* reflects a feeling of alienation from God experienced by Jews in the Holy Land. The Jews are stuck until such time as divine salvation comes to break the cycle of exile experienced through the covenantal curses.

The *petichta* to *Esther Rabbah* is a product of its 6th century CE Palestine, both in its composition and its themes. Composed of eight proems—or literary homilies—on the first verse of Esther, the *petichta* elucidates what occurred “in the days of Achashverosh” (Est 1:1) and applies the biblical past to their own day. The rabbis of the late antiquity lived in a time of rapid transformation in the Holy Land. With the conversion of the

Roman Empire to Christianity, there was a new emphasis on the Holy Land within the Roman Empire. This meant a flood of Christian pilgrimages and building projects which repopulated the landscape.³ In response to such Christianization, the synagogue became the most important part of Late Antique Jewish life. The role of the rabbi increased in the synagogue, leading to the development of the form of literary homilies, or proems, found in the *petichta* to *Esther Rabbah*.⁴

Teleologically, the rabbis understood themselves in the final stage of history. The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar's dream in Daniel 2 is interpreted by the rabbis as referring to the Four Kingdoms which will rule over the Jews before the Messiah comes. The Four Kingdoms are Babylon, Media/Persia, Greece, and Rome. In reading the book of Esther, the rabbis find that the "days of Achashverosh" exist under the kingdom of Media/Persia. In the opening proem of the *petichta*, Rav, a 3rd century rabbi working in Babylon, situates both the events of Esther and the context of the rabbis under the covenantal curses of Deuteronomy 28. In the Torah, God will only inflict these curses over the abandonment of the covenant. Rav shows the different ways the covenantal curses manifest themselves in Jewish life under foreign rule. In the book of Esther, Rav sees a divine plan for the end of the covenantal curses. Rav connects the embargo on the trade of Jewish slaves in Deut 28:68: "And you will offer yourselves there as slaves and handmaidens, but there will be no buyer," with Esther's wish to be sold as a slave instead of killed in Est 7:4: "Because we have been sold, myself and my people, to be destroyed, to be slaughtered, and to be wasted. And if only we had been sold as slaves and as

³ See Jodi Magness, *The Archeology of the Holy Land: From the Destruction of Solomon's Temple to the Muslim Conquest* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 333-348.

⁴ Rachel Anisfeld, *Sustain Me with Raisin-Cakes: Pesikta DeRav Kahana and the Popularization of Rabbinic Judaism*. (Boston: Brill, 2009), 149.

handmaids.”⁵ In this way, Rav identifies the threat of annihilation as a precursor to the completion of the covenantal curses. In rabbinic thought, the completion of the covenantal curses under Rome would mean the coming of the final salvation. In the second proem of the *petichta*, Samuel, a contemporary of Rav, supports this timeline of violence followed by salvation using God’s promise to return Israel to the land. First, the land must heal from Israel’s iniquities, as described in Lev 26:42-43: “And I will remember the land. For the land shall be forsaken of them, making up for its sabbath years by being desolate of them, while they atone for their iniquity...” The rabbis living in the Land of Israel are like strangers in their own land until the cessation of the Torah’s covenantal curses.

Composition and Form

Esther Rabbah is a homiletic midrash on the book of Esther first printed in the collection of midrashim titled *Midrash Rabbah* in the 16th century CE.⁶ Leopold Zunz and Hanoch Albeck showed that *Esther Rabbah*, sometimes referred to as *Midrash Achashverosh* or *Haggadat Megillah*, is composed of two different midrashim on Esther, an earlier and a later text.⁷ The earlier text, *EsthR I*—which spans from the *petichta* to section six—is dated to 500 CE due to its citation of the 5th century *Yerushalmi* and its

⁵ All translations are my own.

⁶ The last published English translation of the *petichta* was the Soncino edition from 1939, and there have never been any extensive literary or theological studies of *Esther Rabbah* in English publications. It is well commented on by scholars in Israel like Arnon Atzmon and Joseph Tabory. See: Joseph Tabory, “פתיחות אסתר מגילת אסתר לשמה,” *תורה לשמה* (2007): 381-399, Joseph Tabory, “הפתיחות לפרשה השביעית,” *מחקרי ירושלים בספרות עברית* (1997): 7-18, Arnon Atzmon, “חלום אסתר רבה ומדרש אבא גוריון מדרש מהוספה למדרש” *JSIJ* 6 (2007): 127-40.

⁷ Koller, *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought*, 165.

quotation in the post-8th century *Ecclesiastes Rabbah*.⁸ *EsthR I* focuses on the character of Achashverosh and the Persian royalty.⁹ The later part of the *Esther Rabbah*, *EsthR II*, is dated between the 11th and 13th centuries.¹⁰

The *petichta* to *Esther Rabbah* is a collection of eight proems on the first three words of Esther: “And it was in the days of Achashverosh” (ויהי בימי אחשורוש). A proem, also called a literary homily, is a rhetorical form presented before the reading of Scripture in the synagogue.¹¹ Rabbis only delivered proems on the Torah and the Five Megillot, but the proem utilizes citations from all parts of Scripture. The form of the proem links two seemingly unrelated verses through a process of linguistic, grammatical, thematic, theological, or halakhic association called *chariza* (literally “stringing beads”).¹² For instance, a rabbi delivering a proem on a passage from Exodus might begin by citing a verse from Song of Songs, and through the process of *חריזה* identify parallel themes that exist between the disparate verses and their broader contexts. A proem would start with the verse from Song of Songs, and end with the first verse of the passage from Exodus, thereby introducing the Torah reading from Exodus for the Sabbath service. In the

⁸ This is according to its usage of *Yosippon* on the Septuagint’s addition to Esther. Hermann Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1991), 346-347. Myron Bialik Lerner nuances the breakdown of earlier and later midrashim, only attributing *EsthR I* through section five. See: Myron Bialik Lerner, “The Works of Aggadic Midrash and the Esther Midrashim,” in Shmuel Safrai, Zeev Safrai, Joshua Schwartz, and Peter J. Tomson (eds.), *The Literature of the Sages, Second Part: Midrash and Targum, Liturgy, Poetry, Mysticism, Contracts, Inscriptions, Ancient Science, and the Languages of Rabbinic Literature* (Assen and Minneapolis: Van Gorcum and Fortress, 2006): 177-189, esp. 181-182 for analysis of components of the text.

⁹ Koller, *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought*, 165.

¹⁰ Strack and Stemberger, *Talmud and Midrash*, 346. For more on the composition of *Esther Rabbah* see: Jacob Neusner, “Esther in Esther Rabbah,” in Jacob Neusner and Alan J. Avery-Peck (eds.) and William Scott Green and Günter Stemberger (consulting eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Midrash: Biblical Interpretation in Formative Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), vol. 1, 59-74.

¹¹ Joseph Heinemann, “The Proem in Aggadic Midrashim: A Form Critical Study,” in *Studies in Aggadah and Folk Literature* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1971), 100-101.

¹² *Ibid.* Cf. *LevR* 16:4, *S.S.R* 1:10, y. Hag. 77b.

midrash, all citations from Scripture are organic in that interaction between any two verses creates the possibility for new meaning.¹³

The power of the proem is in its oral performance, being delivered as a creative exposition before the reading from the Scroll, but this midrash comes down to us in a literary form. The *petichta* shows signs of conscious literary composition on behalf of the redactors. Each of the eight proems included in the *petichta* was included as an independent unit which is read before the reading of Esther in the synagogue on Purim. While each proem uses a different verse to understand Esther 1:1, when the proems are put side by side they offer a rabbinic lens through which to read the beginning of Esther and highlight how the rabbis understood Esther in their own context.

Socio-Historical Context

Scholars agree that one of the primary functions of midrash is to reinterpret Scripture and apply it to the rabbis own day.¹⁴ The 6th century CE is a period of robust rabbinic literary output, including the compilation and final redaction of several midrashic collections in the Land of Israel, as well as the ongoing compilation of the Talmud in Babylonia (modern-day Iraq). The 4th and 5th centuries saw the intellectual authority within the larger Jewish world shifted from the rabbis of the Land of Israel to the Talmudic academies in Babylon.¹⁵ In addition, the office of the patriarch, the most

¹³ I refer to the thinking of Max Kadushin, See: Max Kadushin, *Organic Thinking: A Study in Rabbinic Thought*. (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1976); Max Kadushin, *A Conceptual Commentary on Midrash Leviticus Rabbah: Value Concepts in Jewish Thought* (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1987).

¹⁴ See for instance Jacob Neusner, *The Midrash: An Introduction*. The Library of Classical Judaism (Northvale, N.J.: J. Aronson, 1990) and Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

¹⁵ Salo Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews, Volume II, Christian Era: The First Five Centuries* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1952), 204-209.

recognizable Jewish position of authority, was abolished at the dawn of the 6th century CE.¹⁶ The histories written on this period tend to favor the rabbinic situation in Babylonia over the rabbis in the Land of Israel, since the Babylonian Talmud becomes much more influential to the practice of rabbinic Judaism in later generations.¹⁷ Despite a relative lack of scholarly interest, the Palestinian midrashim like *Esther Rabbah* are essential to understanding rabbinic attitudes towards Torah and Scripture, rabbinic theology, and Jewish responses to various socio-political pressures in Late Antiquity

The *petichta* to *Esther Rabbah* was compiled amidst changes in the material reality of the Jews who remained in Palestine throughout Late Antiquity. Seth Schwartz describes these changes as a process of “Christianization” that occurred as a result of the conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity.¹⁸ Once considered a backwater by the Romans, Syria-Palestina became a focal point for the Roman world after Constantine (313 CE). Christians transformed the physical landscape of the Holy Land, as money poured into the land for the construction of churches, and pilgrimage sites overflowed with Christian devotees.¹⁹ As a result, the Jewish people were relegated to a peripheral position in Late Antique Palestine, although this varied by region.

The typical characterization of Jewish existence under the first centuries of Christian Roman rule is one of constant forced conversions, synagogue seizures, and persecutions.²⁰ The period actually consisted of “unprecedented prosperity in

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 197.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹⁸ Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 B.C.E. 640 C.E.* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), 179.

¹⁹ Jodi Magness, *The Archeology of the Holy Land*, 333. See also See Günter Stemberger, *Jews and Christians in the Holy Land: Palestine in the Fourth Century* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), 68-88.

²⁰ Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society*, 183.

Palestine.”²¹ While the Christianization of the land brought both physical and theological change, not all these changes were necessarily detrimental to the Jewish population. For instance, 5th century CE saw an increase in expansive synagogue building projects. Archeological evidence shows a number of flourishing synagogues appearing at this time in places like Sepphoris and Naaran.²²

Jewish religious life after the 5th century CE increasingly resembles Christian organizations of worship, particularly in the emerging importance of the synagogue.²³ The synagogue becomes an expression of a robust Jewish religious life, both in the big cities of the Galilee like Tiberias, and the reorganized villages of the countryside.²⁴ After the 5th century CE, villages became predominantly associated with one religion, such that a village either had a synagogue *or* a church.²⁵ The rabbis, who before this period held a minimal amount of power, became very influential in the synagogue.²⁶

In Late Antiquity, the Holy Land is reorganized in a process of Christianization which also reorganizes Jewish life. The synagogue takes center stage in the Jewish community. It is the only physical institution which marks Jewish life in the Land of Israel. The rabbis become prominent in the synagogue as teachers and preachers. It is their role to help the Jewish community understand why the land is being transformed by Gentiles, and how it affects the Jews’ relation to God.

Jewish Displacement and Textual Resistance

²¹ *Ibid.*, 214.

²² See Jodi Magness, *The Archeology of the Holy Land*, 301-307.

²³ Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society*, 202.

²⁴ Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 210.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 206-208.

²⁶ Particularly evident with the emergence of the form of the *piyyut*. *Ibid.*, 199, 239. See also Anisfeld, *Sustain Me with Raisin-Cakes*, 149.

Although it would appear that the material reality of 6th century Jewry improved from the previous centuries, the theological writing shows skepticism at the Jews' safety under a Christianized Rome.²⁷ The cultural transformation of the land was a complicated process of layering new religious symbols onto a land already rich with it. Jonathan Z. Smith describes the new Christian Holy Land as being "laid palimpsest-like over the old, and interacting with it in complex ways.... It was a venture made possible at least as much by the Hadrianic 'erasure' of elements of the past as it was by the discovery of new modes of Christian topographical significance."²⁸ The Christianization of the Holy Land was a process of resignification for both Christians and Jews. As Christians laid claim to the land, they imbued it with Christian religious significance in religious writing and through the construction of churches. Meanwhile, for the Jews, it is another example of an imperial force comes to the Holy Land to rule over the Jews, theologically distancing the Jews even further from the restoration of the Temple.²⁹

The rabbinic authorities in Palestine turned towards sacred text as the arena for "fashioning a resistant Jewish identity."³⁰ The rabbis attempted to re-appropriate the land through ritual, but they also recognized Christianization as a process of political control.³¹ Imperial rule, under Persia, Greece, and Rome, was the reality of Jewish existence in the Holy Land since the construction of the Second Temple. As long as the system of

²⁷ Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society*, 181.

²⁸ Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 79. As encountered in: Joshua Levinson, "There is No Place Like Home: Rabbinic Responses to the Christianization of Palestine," in Natalie B. Dohrmann and Annette Yoshiko Reed (eds.), *Jews, Christians, and the Roman Empire: The Poetics of Power in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 101.

²⁹ Levinson, "No Place Like Home," 103.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 116-117.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 120.

empire remained towering over the Jews, they would be unable to restore the covenant and bring about Redemption.

In rabbinic thought, the imperial oppression of the Jews extends back to the destruction of the First Temple and the subsequent exile to Babylon in 586 BCE, and continues in the contemporary Roman Empire. The rabbis rationalize such oppression by showing that, according to the Bible, the Jews are destined to live under four different empires, which the rabbis call the Four Kingdoms. In the second chapter of Daniel, the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, the first of the rulers to subjugate the Jews, has a dream that causes him great anxiety (Dan 2:3). In the dream, a statue is made of four different metals, which is interpreted by Daniel to reflect the empires which will rule over the Jews before the Messianic age:

There appeared a great statue... and its appearance was awesome. The head of that statue was of fine gold; its breast and arms were of silver; its belly and thighs of bronze; its legs were of iron, and its feet part iron and part clay. As you looked on, a stone was hewn out, not by hands, and struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and crushed them. All at once, the iron, clay, bronze, silver, and gold were crushed... a wind carried them off until no trace of them was left. But the stone that struck the statue became a great mountain and filled the earth. (Dan 2:31-35)

Daniel analyzes the dream as referring to the succession of empires following Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon, which is signified in the dream as the gold part of the statue. A second empire of silver will replace Babylon, then a third of bronze, which will conquer the whole earth (Dan 2:39). The empire of iron will smash all the others, but since it is intermixed with clay, its foundation will be suspect. (vs. 2:40-43) Finally a rock, which is God, will destroy the statue altogether and establish itself forever (vs. 2:44-45). The division of the fourth empire will leave room for the establishment of the final kingdom—the kingdom of God—which will wipe out all the empires and rule

forever. The rabbis refer to this future reality as the “World to Come” (עולם הבא), in which the Davidic Messiah defeats Israel’s enemies and reigns over a peaceful divine kingdom on earth. The World to Come marks the cessation of history, the end of time as we know it. In the meantime, the Jewish people exist under the rule of the kingdoms of gold, silver, bronze, iron, and clay. According to the rabbis, the Four Kingdoms of rabbinic theology are Babylon in the days of Nebuchadnezzar, Media in the days of Achashverosh, the Greeks in the days of Antiochus Epiphanes, and the Romans in the days of Vespasian, Trajan, Hadrian, and so on.³² Using the Four Kingdoms framework, the rabbis reduce all the imperial might of Rome to a mere cog in the eschatological machine. In rabbinic eschatology, Rome’s suppression of Jewish freedom will ultimately pale in comparison to the earth-shaking events of redemption. Through the understanding of different manifestations of oppression, the rabbis hope to distill any processes by which the oppression comes to an end.

The Covenantal Curses in the Days of Achashverosh

In the *petichta* to *Esther Rabbah*, the rabbis use the covenantal curses in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 as biblical precedents for understanding oppression in the book of Esther and in their own day. The first proem seeks to understand what occurred “in the days of Achashverosh” through the covenantal curses of Deuteronomy 28:66-68. The biblical context of Deut 28:66-68 is a series of curses and promises whose actualization is

³² Cf. “2. Samuel’s Proem: Divine Attachment to Israel” in this text.

contingent upon how faithfully Israel observes the Mosaic covenant. Deut 28:58 introduces a series of curses: “If you fail to observe faithfully all the words of this Torah, the writings in this book, to fear the Lord the honored and revered the Lord your God....” The threat continues with a promise of plagues new and old (Deut 28:59-61), which will reduce the Israelite population to devastating lows (vs. 28:62-63). The remnant of the nation will then be scattered across the world (vs. 28:64-65). Israel will live in fear for their lives: “And your life will hang in doubt before you, and you will fear night and day, and you will have no trust in your life” (v. 28:66). Every day will be a nightmare: “In the morning you will say: Who will give the evening! From the fear of what your heart will dread, and from the site of what your eyes will see” (v. 28:67). Finally, the Israelites will be returned to Egypt by ship, and sold as slaves but never purchased: “And the Lord will return you to Egypt on ships, on a path that I said to you that you would not see again. And you will offer yourselves there to your enemies as slaves and handmaidens, and there will be no buyer” (v. 28:68). Deuteronomy 28:66-68 exists within a set of curses promising devastation to the Israelites in different forms. When the covenant is broken, all these curses will be manifest in the lives of the Jewish population.

The Midrash investigates how the description of slavery in Deut 28:66 is realized in Jewish lives and Jewish memory. Through a process called atomization, Rav breaks Deut 28:66 into smaller parts for further investigation.³³ First, he tries to understand Deut

³³ There is an academic debate about whether the rabbis reading verses solely atomistically, or also metaliptically. For the side of atomization, see James Kugel, “Two Introductions to Midrash.” *Prooftexts* 3 (1983): 131-155. For the side of metalepsis see: Nicholas Schaser, *Midrash and Metalepsis in Genesis Rabbah: A Reappraisal of Rabbinic Atomism*, From Creation to Redemption: Progressive Approaches to Midrash: Proceedings of the Midrash Section, Society of Biblical Literature 7 (2017), and Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 22-38. For a treatment of metalepsis in the Esther Midrashim see Koller, *Esther in Jewish Thought*, 170-171.

28:66 through the material reality of the Jews, showing that the covenantal curses appear in the lives of the everyday Jew:

Rav opened: “And your life will hang in doubt before you, and you will fear night and day, and you will have no trust in your life” (Deut 28:66) The rabbis and Rabbi Berekiah disagreed about this verse. The rabbis say: “And your life will hang in doubt before you” – This is the one who buys wheat for a year. “And you will fear night and day” – This is the one who buys wheat from the huckster. “And you will have no trust in your life” – This is the one who buys from the baker.³⁴

In the citation above, the midrash attends to Deut 28:66 in three parts, analyzing each individually in terms of food stability. One who buys wheat for a year, when they could have planted a field and yielded for long after, has doubt in their life. From where will they get their wheat the following year? Even more, one who buys wheat from the huckster, for only a week or two at a time, will fear night and day with only a limited supply of food. And what of one who can only afford a singular loaf of bread from the baker which will last just a day or two? Life is not guaranteed to them, their livelihood has come under question. In this way, Deut 28:66 comes true when a Jew is caught with a limited amount of food. *Esther Rabbah* draws on the original context of Deut 28:66 in order to highlight the existence of the Deuteronomistic curses in the rabbinic present—at both the national level and the personal levels. The struggle of the everyday Jew with food security is inextricably linked to the national suffering of the Jewish people.

In Rabbi Berekiah’s ensuing analysis of Deut 28:66, he shows that Jews should be afraid for their lives even when their source of food is secure. This is reflective of the 6th century context of the redactor. Rabbi Berekiah argues that even when a Jew acquires a decent amount of food, they still have reason to be skeptical of their safety:

³⁴ See “1.1 Rav’s Proem: Uncertainty under Empire.”

And Rabbi Berekiah replied: “And your life will hang in doubt before you” – This is the one who buys wheat for three years. “And you will fear night and day” – This is the one who buys wheat for a year. “And you will have no trust in your life” – This is the one who buys wheat from a huckster. The rabbis argued to Rabbi Berekiah: And the one who buys wheat from the baker, what of him? And he said to them: The Torah did not speak on the dead.

The Midrash offers an analysis of Deut 28:66 that shows the realities of differing levels of food insecurity, a message which would apply to the hungry throughout time. In his rejoinder, Rabbi Berekiah aims to make a more pointed analysis. The life of a Jew still hangs in the balance even in times of plenty. There is an inherent answer to this dilemma in the midrash: the predicament of Esther and Mordecai “in the days of Achashverosh.” Esther is made queen after the displacement of Vashti (Est 2:17), and Mordecai reports an assassination attempt on the king to Esther (Est 2:22), but still, Achashverosh offers the livelihood of the Jews to Haman for a ransom (Est 3:18-20). In the book of Esther, political security means physical safety. The nature of Jewish existence in the 6th century CE also supports Rabbi Berekiah’s reading. While Palestine was experiencing an economic boom, the reality of Jewish life under a Christian empire must have seemed tenuous and insecure.

Another interpretation of Deut 28:66 contained in Rav’s proem corroborates Rabbi Berekiah’s pessimistic outlook for the Jews, applying Deut 28:66 to the predicament of a Jew in the prison of Caesarea:

Another word: “And your life will hang in doubt before you” [Deut 28:66] – This is the one who is put in the prison at Caesarea. “And you will fear night and day” – This is the one who went out for judgement. “And you will have no trust in your life” – This is the one who went out to be hanged.

The inclusion of “the prison of Caesarea” brings Deut 28:66 into the context of the redactors. The rabbis and Rabbi Berekiah’s interpretations could apply to the experiences of Jews throughout time, but this tradition specifically places the curse of Deut 28:66 in the context of the Roman occupation of Palestine. The rabbis intend to apply the context of the book of Esther to the Jewish experience with the Roman Empire. For the rabbis, just as the Jews feared for their lives in the book of Esther, they do so again under the Roman Empire.

The connection between oppression in the book of Esther and under the Roman Empire is tied even closer with the utilization of the Four Kingdoms trope. The midrash applies the Four Kingdoms to Deut 28:67: “In the morning you will say: Who will give the evening! Because of the fear of what your heart will dread and because of the sight of what your eyes will see.” According to the midrash, in the days when the curses of Deuteronomy 28 occur, the morning will bring only fear and trauma, such that one calls out for night to come swiftly. The midrash understands this verse not as referring to the rise and fall of the sun, but to the rise and fall of the Four Kingdoms:

In the morning of Babylon you will say: Who will give the evening of Media? And in the morning of Media you will say: Who will give the evening of Greece? And in the morning of Greece you will say: Who will give the evening of Edom [Rome]? Why is this? “Because of the fear of what your heart will dread and because of the sight of what your eyes will see.”³⁵

Rav reads the future tense of “the fear of what your heart will dread” from the latter half of Deut 28:67 into the first half of the verse, such that basic logic of the passage is that the dawn of one empire necessitates a call for an end to the next. It is a lament for the continuous suffering of the Jewish people under imperial rule. Media and

³⁵ See “1.2 Rav’s Proem: The Dawn and Dusk of Empire.”

Rome are then one and the same. But at the same time, the rabbis understand that Rome is the end of empires. The rabbis believe that Rome, which was appropriating the Holy Land before their eyes, would eventually come crashing down when God destroys the Roman Empire and enacts Redemption. Thus, the redactors situate themselves in the deciding age of history, where Jews will perpetually toil under the Roman oppression until the covenant is fulfilled. While Rome rules, both the Jewish righteous and unrighteous will continue to suffer under the covenantal curses. The political and material reality of the Jews under empire is explained theologically through the covenantal curses. The rabbinic interpretation of Esther—via Deuteronomy—reflects the rabbis’ questions of how much longer the curses will linger as the Land of Israel remains under Christian-Roman authority.

The Nature and Conclusion of the Covenantal Curses

Not only does the midrash show how the covenantal curses are manifest in history, but it also describes how the curses function within the framework of the Four Kingdoms. The covenantal curses unfolded and concluded under Babylon and Media, and again they are unfolding under the Roman Empire. The Midrash highlights the covenantal curses as a primary reason the righteous are punished, so the continued suffering of the Jews in the 6th century CE can be blamed on the curses. The Midrash shows this in Rav’s *chariza* on Deut 28:68, which reads: “And the Lord will cause you to return to Egypt on ships, on a path that I said to you that you would not see again. And you will offer yourselves there to your enemies as slaves and handmaidens, and there will be no buyer.” Beginning with the first half of Deut 28:68, Rav quotes a tradition of Rabbi

Shimon ben Yochai that shows three places in Torah where the covenant forbids Israel's return to Egypt, and three places where the covenant was transgressed. One of the restrictions for returning to Egypt is Deut 28:68. The example Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai provides for Deut 28:68 is an aggadic story of Trajan, who exacts revenge on the Jews for mourning when his child is born and celebrating when his child dies. Trajan's story shows how the covenantal curses appear under the Roman Empire, and also explains that misfortune falls on the righteous through the enactment of the covenantal curses:

And the third [violation] was in the days of Trajan, may his bones be crushed! His wife gave birth on the night of the Ninth of Av, and all Israel was mourning. The child died on Hannukah. Israel said: 'Will we light or will we not light the Hannukah candles?' They said: 'We will light, and all that happens will happen.' So they lit. And the people went to speak wrong of the Jews to the wife of Trajan, saying: 'Those Jews, when you gave birth, they were mourning, and when the child died, they lit their wicks.' She sent and wrote to her husband: 'While you've been suppressing the Barbarians, the Jews have rebelled against you. Come and suppress them.' Trajan boarded a ship, and thought to come in 10 days, but there was a wind and he came in 5 days. He came and uncovered the Jews engaged in the learning of this verse: "The Lord will lift upon you a nation from remoteness, from the extremity of space, like the vulture swoops down..." (Deut 28:49) Trajan said to them: 'I am he, the vulture who thought to come in ten days and was given by the wind in five days.' He surrounded them with his legions and he slew them.³⁶

This story does not explicitly show the fulfillment of Deut 28:68. In fact, there is no mention of the verse in this story. Rather, we see the fulfillment of the vulture of Deut 28:49 in the character of Trajan, who descends upon the Jews for insulting him. The historical Trajan (r. 98-117 CE) was famous for suppressing a series of Jewish revolts throughout the Mediterranean Diaspora, including a revolt in Egypt where Trajan abandoned his Parthian campaign to put a stop to the uprising.³⁷ The narrative translates

³⁶ See "1.3 Rav's Proem: Returning to Egypt."

³⁷ See Salo Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews: Volume II, Christian Era: The First Five Centuries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1937), 93-98.

the historical facts of this real-life revolution into a tale of righteous rabbis. These righteous Jews engaged in the study of Torah are the victims of the covenantal curses which continue to rage under the Roman Empire. This story implies that the fulfillment of Deut 28:49 in the figure of Trajan precludes the fulfillment of Deut 28:68 in the future of the Roman oppression; that is, the curses occur in a linear order as described in Torah. Thus, all the curses of Deuteronomy 28 will occur under the Roman Empire, with Deut 28:49 coming true before Deut 28:68. In addition, Rav presents a theodicy which would explain the deaths of righteous Jews under the Four Kingdoms framework: they are victims of the covenantal curses. When the Jews transgress the covenant, later generations will suffer the consequences of the covenantal curses. Trajan is not directly responsible for the punishment of the Jews; he is only the medium through which the covenantal curses occur. Thus, according to the midrash, the situation in 6th century CE Palestine is just another unfolding covenantal curse.

The rabbis are eager for the conclusion of the covenantal curses under Rome, but are afraid of the conclusion of the curses. The redactors question how the covenantal curses will come to a violent end in the final חריזה of the opening proem on the second part of Deut 28:68: “And you will offer yourselves there to your enemies as slaves and handmaidens, and there will be no buyer.” The end of the proem means we are approaching the final midrashic connection between Deut 28:66 and Est 1:1. Rabbi Yitzchak connects the idea that Israel cannot be sold as slaves with the words of Esther in Est 7:4: “And if only we had been sold as slaves and as handmaids.” The Midrash implies the completion of the curses of Deuteronomy 28 includes the threat of annihilation, prompting the feeling of pessimism expressed by the redactor:

Rabbi Yitzchak said: You will not be possessed as slaves and handmaids, but rather you will be possessed to be destroyed, slaughtered and wasted, like when Esther said to Achashverosh: “And if only we had been sold as slaves and as handmaids” (Est 7:4) like Moses our teacher wrote to us in the Torah: “And you will try to sell yourselves there to your enemies, as slaves and as handmaids, but there will be no buyer.” (Deut 28:68) What did he mean instead? To be destroyed, to be slaughtered, and to be wasted. When they saw thus, they gathered together and cried ‘Woe!’ And it was woe that was “in the days of Achashverosh.” (Est 1:1)³⁸

This discussion of the covenantal curses in Rav’s proem was all a buildup to the introduction of “in the days of Achashverosh.” Esther’s wish for slavery in the face of genocide is the fulfillment of an embargo on Jewish slaves in the covenantal curses. The midrash ties together the idea of annihilation and inability to find work as slaves. Rabbi Yitzchak recognizes that Deut 28:68 is the last curse in all of Deuteronomy, and therefore all of the Torah. In fact the terms of the covenant are concluded in the following verse: “These are the terms of the covenant which the Lord commanded to Moses to conclude with the Israelites in the land of Moab, in addition to the covenant which He had made with them at Horeb” (Deut 28:69). The story of Trajan already showed how the curses of Deuteronomy 28 unfolded over time, so the fulfillment of Deut 28:68 would mean the end of the covenantal curses. Connecting the end of the covenantal curses with the events of Esther suggests that there might be an unstated punishment: the threat of annihilation, a deciding moment in the future of the Jews. Just as the covenantal curses came to a conclusion in Media after the persecution of Haman, so too another empire-wide persecution may be necessary for the covenantal curses to be eclipsed in the Roman period. Luckily, Esther was there to suspend the threat of annihilation in Media-Persia. In

³⁸ See “1.4 Rav’s Proem: Jews in Bondage.”

light of the biblical past, the rabbis allude to the notion that the end of the covenantal curses under the Roman Empire may conclude with a similar threat of annihilation.

A Paradox of Imperial Rule

Later in the *petichta* to *Esther Rabbah*, the rabbis highlight a paradox of imperial rule which reflects the feeling of pessimism under the covenantal curses. In the 7th proem, Rabbi Judah bar Simon introduces Job 34:30 as his verse under consideration: “From the rule of an impious man, from the ensnarement of the people.” Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish offer opinions of the verse showing that Israel cannot “grow wings” under imperial rule, and imperial rule tends to sustain itself by causing Israel to sin:

Rabbi Yochanan said: ‘In the hour the hypocrite king rules over creation, the people are ensnared because of their severe and punishable words. Their desire was not to serve the Creator of the World.’ Rabbi Simon ben Lakish says: ‘It would be easier for creation to grow wings and to bloom in empty space if it didn’t serve under the hand of a hypocrite king.’³⁹

If “the hypocrite king” is read as referring to the Gentile empires which rule over Israel, then Resh Lakish shows that the efflorescence of the people of Israel is repressed by imperial rule. Moreover, Rabbi Yochanan says that when the people of Israel operate under empire, they tend to become “ensnared” in apostasy and idolatry. For Israel to fulfill the covenant, they would need to be liberated from under imperial rule. Yet Empire is a symptom of the covenantal curses which Israel themselves made a reality; the sins of the Jewish people led to imperial rule. In rabbinic thought, the only way to end the paradox of imperial rule is through divine intervention, which *Esther Rabbah* addresses in the second proem, i.e. the proem of Samuel.

³⁹ See “7. Rabbi Judah bar Simon’s Second Proem: The Hour of the Hypocrite King.”

The Promise of Redemption

The second proem of the *petichta* to *Esther Rabbah* describes the inevitable divine intervention which will end the oppression of the Roman Empire and the Jewish estrangement from the land of Israel. The Four Kingdoms can only conclude with the violence of the wars of Gog and Magog, as described in Ezekiel 38-39, but that war will also mark the final completion of the covenantal curses. Samuel uses Leviticus 26:44 to show that God's commitment to the covenant is never in question: "Yet even then, when they are in the land of their enemies, I did not reject them, and I did not loathe them to smite them, to break my covenant with them, because I am the Lord their God" (Lev 26:44). For the redactor, this promise of God's love "in the land of their enemies" is particularly relevant. While existence in the Holy Land in the 6th century meant living in the land of the enemy, the midrash understands that the land will be returned to Israel when the covenantal curses conclude.

Samuel uses the promise of an upheld covenant in Lev 26:44 to understand the Four Kingdoms framework. In atomizing Lev 26:44, Samuel shows how God remains dedicated to the covenant with Israel throughout Jewish oppression of the Jews under the Four Kingdoms. Ultimately, Israel will be redeemed from their iniquities:

Samuel opened: "Yet even then, when they are in the land of their enemies, I did not reject them, and I did not loathe them to smite them, to break my covenant with them, because I am the Lord their God." (Lev 26:44) "I did not reject them" in Babylon, and "I did not loathe them" in Media, "to smite them" in Greece, "to break my covenant with them" in the kingdom of wickedness [Rome], "because I am the Lord their God" designated to come.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ See "2. Samuel's Proem: Divine Attachment to Israel."

The Four Kingdoms trope concludes with the coming of God. Messianic expectation appears here for the first time in the *petichta* to *Esther Rabbah*. Rav's proem discussed how the covenantal curses are manifested in Jewish history and how they continue to be manifest; nowhere does Rav hint that the cycle of oppression will be eclipsed by a Messianic event. Samuel's proem is attached to Rav almost as a rejoinder. Immediately, Samuel attributes the realization of covenantal curses to the impending coming of the Messiah. They both exist as part of an unfolding divine plan, witnessed in Scripture. Samuel's proem also addresses problems directly relating to the context of the redactor. Samuel cites Rabbi Chaya atomizing Lev 26:44 in relation to the Roman oppression, which will ultimately end with the divine war of Gog and Magog:

Rabbi Chaya taught: "I did not reject them" in the days of Vespasian, and "I did not loathe them" in the days of Trajan, "to smite them" in the days of Haman, "to break my covenant with them" in the days of the Romans, "because I am the Lord their God" in the days of Gog and Magog.

Rabbi Chaya shows how God did not abandon the Jews even during the Roman period. The oppression of the Jews at the hand of the Romans will end with the "days of Gog and Magog." Gog and Magog appear in Ezekiel 38-39 as the final reckoning of God. The armies of Gog and Magog will descend upon the Land of Israel on horseback (Ezek 38:18) where there will be an epic battle which will end with the final Redemption and Judgement of God (Ezek 29:21-22). Samuel's proem corroborates some of the assumptions made in Rav's proem. In both, the covenantal curses are seen to be unfolding at length over the framework of the Four Kingdoms, while also taking place under each separate age of imperial rule. The covenantal curses took place both in the days of Haman, and in the days of Trajan. Samuel and Rav also agree that, as in the times of Haman and Trajan, the conclusion of the covenantal curses will be violent. Samuel

associates this violence with the final war of Gog and Magog which is prophesied to take place before history ends.

The curses of Leviticus 26 describes how God will displace the people from the land of Israel, so that both the people and the land can heal from Israel's sins. The midrashic shift from Deuteronomy to Leviticus is fitting because, unlike Deuteronomy 28, Leviticus 26 explicates the manner in which the covenantal curses will come to an end:

When I, in turn, have been hostile to them and have removed them into the land of their enemies, then at last shall their obdurate heart humble itself, and they shall atone for their iniquity... and I will remember the land. For the land shall be forsaken of them, making up for its sabbath years by being desolate of them, while they atone for their iniquity; for the abundant reason that they rejected My rules and spurned My laws. Yet, even then, when they are in the land of their enemies, I did not reject them, and I did not loathe them to smite them, to break my covenant with them, because I am the Lord their God. (Lev 26:39-42)

In this passage, the placement of Israel under the rule of the enemy is necessary so that the land can recover from the peoples' iniquity. At the same time, Israel atones for their iniquity under imperial rule. After atonement, God will remember the covenant with Israel and "will remember the land." Thus, Leviticus provides an assurance of God's love for Israel, even when they sin and are oppressed under imperial rule. In the rabbis' 6th century context, the appropriation of the land through Christianization is a fulfillment of Leviticus 26 in that the land is "forsaken of" the Jews. When the land recovers from the iniquities of Israel, then God will be ready to return the people to the land.

In the first two proems of the *petichta to Esther Rabbah*, the rabbis show how the covenantal curses manifest in different periods of Jewish history. In discussing the curses of Deut 28:66-68, Rav grounds us in the function of the covenantal curses. The חריזה on

Deut 28:66 shows the realization how the covenantal curses are realized in the lives of the everyday Jew. When a Jew suffers from food shortage, they are suffering because of the transgression of the covenant. Similarly, even when a Jew is secure in their food supply, the covenantal curses are still active, as evidenced by the feeling of dread under imperial rule. Finally, Deut 28:66 is used to show that the covenantal curses are active under the Roman Empire. The חריזה on Deut 28:67 expands our understanding of the covenantal curses outside of the everyday and the Roman Empire to include all of Jewish history. Using the framework of the Four Kingdoms, the חריזה shows how the covenantal curses are manifest under each of the empires: Babylon, Media, Greece and Rome. The חריזה on Deut 28:68 shows how the covenantal curses play out in order, such that they culminate with the curse of Deut 28:68, the last curse in the Torah. The midrash links Deut 28:68 to the lament of Esther in Est 7:4. This linguistic connection between Deut 28:68 and Est 7:4 is the primary impetus for using Deut 28:66-68 in the *petichta* to *Esther Rabbah*, but the rabbis relate them in a clear and relevant way. The inability for Israel to be sold as slaves is an indication that the conclusion of the covenantal curses means either the total destruction of Israel or divine salvation.

Samuel's proem shows that the only conclusion to the covenantal curses is Messianic deliverance, although Messianic deliverance is preceded by the violence of "the days of Gog and Magog." The Jews in the Land of Israel exist within the current curse of Lev 26:39, where they are estranged from the Land of Israel. The land needs to heal from iniquity as much as the people need to atone for their sins. The first two proems mediate some of the redactors' anxiety over their current socio-historical situation. The Christianization of the land is part of the process of the covenantal curses under the

Roman Empire, which is destined to end in violence but ultimately conclude with salvation. The rabbis may be displaced theologically from the Land of Israel, but they will ultimately be reconciled to the land with the completion of the covenantal curses.

Conclusion

The rabbis of the *petichta to Esther Rabbah* take as their main concern the continued manifestation of the covenantal curses under the Roman Empire and how they will finally end. The midrash first develops an understanding of the covenantal curses as existing under the Four Kingdoms framework. The days of Achashverosh and the days of the redactor become comparable as existing within a religious paradigm of imperial oppression. The rabbis then show how the covenantal curses appear in the lives of Jews, as best exemplified in the tale of Trajan in Rav's opening proem. The covenantal curses are embodied in that story through the punishment of the righteous. A theodicy develops from the application of the covenantal curses to the Roman period; the active fulfillment of the covenantal curses over the course of the Roman oppression would explain the continued suffering of righteous Jews, who would otherwise appear to be suffering without cause.

The rabbis feeling of displacement experienced in the 6th century CE is both lived and perceived in the *petichta to Esther Rabbah*. It is lived in the socio-historical context of the rabbis and their reflection on those material circumstances in the text. The Jews of Palestine's relative prosperity during this period was still overshadowed by a feeling of dread in the face of the Roman Empire. The rabbis translate this lived experience into the perceived, mainly the framework of the Four Kingdoms which expects divine salvation.

The feeling of dread experienced in the face of the Roman Empire then becomes comparable to the feeling of dread experienced by Esther in the face of annihilation. The realization of the covenantal curses over the course of history and in the lives of individuals is the tying link between the lived and the perceived. The covenantal curses are experienced in real life, and real life is reflected in the eschatological timeline of rabbinic thought. Grasping for hope, the rabbis gain agency over their feeling of pessimism and dread in the Land of Israel with the reassurance that ultimately, after the violence, there will be a divine reconciliation with the land.

The Petichta to Esther Rabbah: Translation and Commentary

וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ

Est 1:1 – “And it was in the days of Achashverosh – that Achashverosh who reigned over 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia”
– The entirety of the petichta is devoted to this singular verse. It is a study as to what exactly occurred in the days of Achashverosh, and what that represents.

“And it was in the days of Achashverosh” (Est 1:1)

1.1 Rav’s Proem: Uncertainty under Empire

רב פתח דברים כח, **סו**: והיו חטיף תלאים לך מנגד, רבנן ורבי ברכיה, רבנן אמרי והיו חטיף תלאים לך, זה שהוא לוקח חטים לשנה. **דברים כח, סו**: ופחדת לילה ויום, זה שהוא לוקח חטין מן הסידקי. ולא תאמין בחטיף, זה שהוא לוקח לו מן הפלטר. ורבי ברכיה אמר: והיו חטיף תלאים לך, זה שהוא לוקח לו חטים לשלש שנים. ופחדת לילה ויום, זה שהוא לוקח לו חטים לשנה. ולא תאמין בחטיף, זה שהוא לוקח לו חטים מן הסידקי. מתיבין רבנן לרבי ברכיה והלוקח מן הפלטר מהו, אמר להם לא דברה תורה במתים. דבר אחר, והיו חטיף תלאים לך מנגד, זה שהוא נתון בדיוטי של קיסרין. ופחדת לילה ויום, זה שהוא יוצא לדון. ולא תאמין בחטיף, זה שהוא יוצא להצלב. רב פתר קרטיה בהמן, והיו חטיף תלאים לך מנגד, מעת לעת מהסרת טבעת. ופחדת לילה ויום, בשעה שהפתיים פורחין. ולא תאמין בחטיף **אסתר ג, יד**: להיות עתדים ליום הזה.¹

Deut 28:66 – “And your life will hang in doubt before you, and you will fear night and day, and you will have no trust in your life”

– coming near the end of a list of punishments “if Israel fails to observe faithfully all the words of the Torah” (Deut 28:58)⁵

opened – marking the beginning of a sermon⁶

disagreed – R, which is what I will call the redactor interrupts Rav’s sermon with this argument

this – the rabbis compare the three parts of Deut 28:66 to the amount of bread one can afford **for a year** – instead of planting wheat and yielding for long after⁷

from a huckster – wheat for only a week or two at a time⁸

from the baker – wheat for only a day or two⁹

for three years – a large amount of wheat in times of plenty, but life hangs in doubt despite the good fortune

on the dead – R. Berekiah implies that to buy bread for only a day or two at a time is to be as good as dead

another – Rav gives his interpretation of Deut 28:66

prison at Caesarea – the seat of the Roman government in Palestine. The *Heb.* uses the colloquial name for this particular prison

Rav opened: “And your life will hang in doubt before you” (*Deut 28:66*)

The rabbis and Rabbi Berekiah disagreed about this verse

The rabbis say:

“And your life will hang in doubt before you” – This is the one who buys wheat for a year

“And you will fear night and day” – This is the one who buys wheat from the huckster²

“And you will have no trust in your life” – This is one who buys wheat from the baker³

And Rabbi Berekiah replied:

“And your life will hang in doubt before you” – This is the one who buys wheat for three years

“And you will fear night and day” – This is the one who buys wheat for a year

“And you will have no trust in your life” – This is one who buys wheat from a huckster

The rabbis argued to Rabbi Berekiah:

And the one who buys from the baker, what of him?

And he said to them:

The Torah did not speak on the dead

Another word:

“And your life will hang in doubt before you” – This is the one who is put in the prison⁴ at Caesarea

“And you will fear night and day” – This is the one who went out for judgement

“And you will have no trust in your life” – This is the one who went out to be hanged

loosening of the ring – When Achashverosh gave Haman the royal signet to sign the decree ordering mass killings of Jews, cf. Est 3:12

letters blossomed forth – When the executive order was sent throughout Persia/Media, cf. Est 3:13

made ready for this day – When the country would rise up against their Jewish neighbors

Rav interpreted the text as calling on Haman:

“And your life will hang in doubt before you”

– From the time of the loosening of the ring

“And you will fear night and day” – In the hour that the letters blossomed forth

“And you will have no trust in your life” – “To be made ready for this day” (Est 3:14)

Deut 28:66 depicts a future for Israel where the expectation is survival and uncertainty. For the rabbis and Rabbi Berekiah, this is witnessed in their own day in the plight of the everyday Jew making their purchase of wheat. The rabbis show the reality of food insecurity: to know the source of your food for only a year is to doubt your life, for a couple weeks to fear night and day, and to only have food for a few days is to abandon hope in life. Rabbi Berekiah understands the verse in an even harsher light: even in times of plenty, one’s fate remains doubtful, and those on their last few days of food are as good as dead. Keep in mind the socio-historical context of the midrash. Had not Haman been incited to rage by Mordecai’s rise to success? Did not constant imperial rule create an environment of uncertainty for these rabbis? The rabbis show how the Torah reflects the lived experiences of many sufferings from food shortages, capturing the descent into instability. Rabbi Berekiah teaches a lesson through Torah, learned from lived experience. Finally, Rav’s tradition comparing Deut 28:66 to the situation of a prisoner in Caesarea explicitly ties the interpretation of this verse to imperialism. The political and material reality of Roman occupied Palestine finds sufficient expression in the gloomy outlook of Deut 28:66.

1.2 Rav's Proem: The Dawn and Dusk of Empire

בבקר תאמר מי יתן ערב דברים כח, זו, בבקרה של בבל תאמר מי יתן ערבה. בבקרה של מדי
תאמר מי יתן ערבה, בבקרה של יון תאמר מי יתן ערבה, בבקרה של אדום תאמר מי יתן ערבה.
דבר אחר, בבקר תאמר מי יתן ערב, בבקרה של בבל תאמר מי יתן ערבה של מדי, ובבקרה של
מדי תאמר מי יתן ערבה של יון, ובבקרה של יון תאמר מי יתן ערבה של אדום. למה, מפחד
לבברך אשר תפחד וממראה עיניך אשר תראה.¹⁰

Deut 28:67 – “In the morning you will say:
Who will give the evening! From the fear of
what your heart dreads, and from the sight of
what your eyes will see”

Babylon, Media, Greece, Edom – The
famous motif of the Four Kingdoms that will
rule over the Jews, taken from Daniel 2 and
7.¹² Babylon ruled after the destruction of the
First Temple, Media in the days of Cyrus and
Esther, Greece in the time of the
Hasmoneans, and Edom, or Rome, who
brought about the destruction of the Second
Temple and rule until the days of R.
will dread, will see – The second
interpretation of Deut 28:67 reads the first
half of the verse in light of the future tense of
the second half.

“In the morning you will say: Who will give the evening!” (*Deut 28:67*)

In the morning of Babylon you will say: Who will give its evening!

In the morning of Media you will say: Who will give its evening!

In the morning of Greece¹¹ you will say: Who will give its evening!

In the morning of Edom you will say: Who will give its evening!

Another word on “In the morning you will say: Who will give the
evening!”

In the morning of Babylon you will say: Who will give the evening
of Media?

And in the morning of Media you will say: Who will give the
evening of Greece?

And in the morning of Greece you will say: Who will give the
evening of Edom?

Why is this? “From the fear of what your heart will dread, and from
the site of what your eyes will see” (*Deut 28:67*)

A political interpretation sees Deut 28:67 echoing throughout history in the rise and fall of empires. As opposed to the exegesis of Deut 28:66, the verse is not atomized, meaning is not ascribed to every part of the verse. Rather, Deut 28:67 is spread throughout time, explaining the predicament of the Jews. See how the Jews have been punished throughout time, as promised in Deuteronomy 28 if they fail to obey the commandments and see how it is manifested in every verse. Rav cleverly uses tense to predicate the everlasting condition of the Jewish people under imperial rule. The dawn of one empire means one must replace it.

1.3 Rav's Proem: Returning to Egypt

וְהִשִּׁיבְךָ ה' מִצְרַיִם בְּאֲנִיּוֹת דְּבָרִים כַּח, סו. אָמַר רַבִּי יִצְחָק בְּאֲנִיּוֹת, בְּעֵנִיּוֹת מִמַּעֲשִׂים טוֹבִים. וְלָמָּה לְמִצְרַיִם, שְׁפָעוֹר וְרַע יֵשׁ לְעַבְדֵי כְּשֶׁהוּא חוֹזֵר לְרַבּוֹ הָרָאשׁוֹן. אָמַר רַבִּי שְׁמַעוֹן בֶּן יוֹחָאי בְּשִׁלְשָׁה מְקוֹמוֹת הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מְזַהֵר לְיִשְׂרָאֵל שְׁלֹא יִחְזְרוּ לְמִצְרַיִם, הָרָאשׁוֹן שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר שְׁמוֹת יֵד, יג: כִּי אֲשֶׁר רָאִיתֶם אֶת מִצְרַיִם וְגו', וְהִשְׁבִּי כְּתִיב דְּבָרִים יז, טז: וְה' אָמַר לָכֶם לֹא תִסְפּוּן לָשׁוּב בְּדֶרֶךְ הַזֶּה, וְהִדִּין שְׁלִישִׁי, דְּכְתִיב דְּבָרִים כַּח, סו: וְהִשִּׁיבְךָ ה' מִצְרַיִם בְּאֲנִיּוֹת. בְּשִׁלְשֶׁתָּן כְּפָרוּ וּבְשִׁלְשֶׁתָּן לָקוּ. הָרָאשׁוֹנָה בִּימֵי סַנְחַרִּיב, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר יִשְׁעִיהּ לָא, א: הוּא הִירְדִים מִצְרַיִם לְעֶזְרָה, מֵה כְּתִיב בְּתַרְיָה: וּמִצְרַיִם אָדָם וְלֹא אֵל. שְׁנִית, בִּימֵי יוֹחָנָן בֶּן קֶרֶחַ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר יִרְמִיָּה מֵב, טז: וְהִתְהַלַּח הַחֶרֶב אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם יְרֵאִים מִמֶּנָּה וְגו'. וְהִשְׁלִישִׁית בִּימֵי טַרְכִינּוֹס שְׁחִיק עֲצֻמוֹת, יְלָדָה אֲשֶׁתוֹ בְּלִיל תִּשְׁעָה בָּאָב וְהָיוּ כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲבָלִים, נִשְׁחַק הַזֶּלֶד בְּחִנְפָּה, אָמְרוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל נְדָלִיק אוֹ לֹא נְדָלִיק, אָמְרוּ נְדָלִיק וְכָל מֵה דְּבַעֵי לִימְטִי עָלָן יִמְטִי, אֲדָלִיקוּ, אֲזָלוּן וְאָמְרוּן לִישָׁנָא בִישׁ לְאֲשֶׁתוֹ שֶׁל טַרְכִינּוֹס, אֵילִין יְהוּדָאִין כֹּד יְלִידָתָהּ הוּוּ מֵתְאֲבָלִין, וְכֹד מֵיִת וְלָדָא אֲדָלִיקוּ בּוֹצִינִין. שְׁלַחָה וְכְתָבָה לְבַעֲלָהּ עַד דָּאֵת מַכְבֵּשׁ בְּרַבְרַיִין, בּוֹא וְכּוֹבֵשׁ אֵילִין יְהוּדָאִין דְּמָרְדוּ בָּהּ. סָלִיק לְאֵילְפָא וְחִשְׁבַּ לְמִיתִי בְּעֶשְׂרָה יוֹמִין, וְאֵיִתִּיהּ רוּחָא בְּחַמְשָׁה יוֹמִין, אֵתָא וְאִשְׁכַּחִינוּן דְּהוּוּ עֲסִיקִין בְּהִדִּין פְּסוּקָא דְּבָרִים כַּח, מט: יִשָּׂא ה' עֲלֶיךָ גּוֹי מִרְחַק מְקַצֵּה הָאָרֶץ כְּאֲשֶׁר יִדְאָה הַנָּשֶׁר, אָמַר לְהוֹן אָנָּה הוּא נִשְׂרָא דְּחִשְׁבִּית לְמִיתִי בְּעֶשְׂרָה יוֹמִין וְאֵיִתִּיתִי רוּחָא בְּחַמְשָׁה יוֹמִין, הַקִּיפּוֹן לְגִיּוֹנֵתִיו וְהַרְגֵן.¹³

Deut 28:68 – “And the Lord will return you to Egypt on ships, on a path that I said to you that you would not see again. And you will offer yourselves there to your enemies as slaves and handmaidens, and there will be no buyer.”

Exod 14:13 – “And Moses said to the people: Do not be afraid! Stand by and see the salvation that the Lord will work for you today, because the Egyptians that you see today you will never again see.”

– The promise of Moses to the Israelites that God will deliver them, as Pharaoh’s chariots surrounded the fleeing Israelites on the banks of the Sea of Reeds.

Deut 17:16 – “Also, he will not acquire horses or send people back to Egypt to add to his horses, since the Lord said to you all: You must never return on this path.”

– Laws allowing for a monarchy under divine authority, forbidding a foreign ruler, and retrieving horses from Egypt.

Isa 31:1,3 – “Oy to those who go down to Egypt for help and rely upon horses! They have put their trust in abundance of chariots, in vast numbers of riders, and they have not turned to the Holy One of Israel, they have not sought the Lord... And Egypt is a man and not a god, and their horses are flesh, not spirit”

– Addressing those who would turn to Egypt for foreign aid. The rest of the chapter is a rally cry: Israel, the helpless sheep cowering before the roaring lion of Assyria, is saved by the shepherd, the Lord of Hosts. Cf. with the historical parallel in 2 Kings 17-18

Jer 42:16 – “The sword that you fear shall overtake you there, in the land of Egypt, and the famine you worry over shall follow at your heels in Egypt too; and there you shall die”

– Jeremiah warns against fleeing to Egypt before their Babylonian invaders. The Judeans do not listen, and seek shelter in Egypt. So God sends Nebuchadnezzar to Egypt, sparking the events leading to the destruction of the Temple.

ships, poverty – Rabbi Yitzchak makes a pun on “in ships” and “in poverty.”¹⁵

first master – Egypt enslaved the Israelites first, cf. Exod 1

suffered on all three – Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai showed three places where Israel was warned not to return to Egypt, now he shows how each of those warnings were violated

days of Sennacherib – the events referred to in Isaiah 31 address direct violations of the laws in Deut 17:16. In biblical chronology, this would be the first violation to occur. Sennacherib was the king of Assyria who conquered Judea and was given many gifts to leave peacefully. Relates to the laws against foreign rulers in Deut 17:15

days of Yochanan ben Kareah – per the events of Jer 42, the Judeans did not stay and trust in God’s protection in the land of Israel and instead fled to Egypt, going against Moses’ promise in Exod 14:13. Yochanan ben Kareah was the commander of the Judean army.

“And the Lord will return you to Egypt on ships”
(Deut 28:68)¹⁴

Rabbi Yitzchak said:

On ships, or rather, in poverty of good deeds.
And why to Egypt? Because it is repulsiveness
and evil for a slave when he is returned to his
first master

Said Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai:

In three places the Holy One, blessed is He,
warned Israel that they should not return to
Egypt

The first, as it is written: “Because that you all
saw Egypt...” (Exod 14:13)

And the second, written: “And the Lord said to
you: You will no more return on the way”
(Deut 17:16)

And the third insight, as it is written: “And the
Lord will cause you to return to Egypt on
ships” (Deut 28:68)

[Israel] ignored the three warnings and they suffered
on all three:

The first was in the days of Sennacherib, as it is
said: “Woe to those that descend to Egypt for
help.” (Isa 31:1) What is written in warning?
“And Egypt is a man and not a god...” (Isa
31:3)

The second was in the days of Yochanan ben
Kareah, as it is said: “And it will be the sword
you all fear that will...” (Jer 42:16)

Deut 28:49 – “The Lord will lift upon you a nation from remoteness, from the extremity of space, like the vulture swoops down, a nation whose language you do not know” – In the same vein of curses as Deut 28:66-67

days of Trajan – Trajan (ruled 98-117 CE) is well known for spoiling multiple Jewish rebellions in the Diaspora, including an insurrection in Egypt, for which Trajan had to abandon his war with the Parthians.¹⁸ In this story, Trajan descends on the Jews as the vulture predicted in Deut 28:49. The calendar dictated a fatal blow to these rabbis; merely observing the rabbinic laws led to their demise. This punishment implies the eventual fulfillment of Deut 28:68 in a line of curses. We can assume that these rabbis who were slain by Trajan resided in Egypt, and thus are our third example of Jews returning to Egypt.

And the third was in the days of Trajan,¹⁶ may his bones be crushed! His wife gave birth on the night of the Ninth of Av, and all Israel was mourning. The child died on Hannukah. Israel said: ‘Will we light or will we not light the Hannukah candles?’ They said: ‘We will light, and all that happens will happen.’¹⁷ So they lit. And the people went to speak wrong of the Jews to the wife of Trajan, saying: ‘Those Jews, when you gave birth, they were mourning, and when the child died, they lit their wicks.’ She sent and wrote to her husband: ‘While you’ve been suppressing the Barbarians, the Jews have rebelled against you. Come and suppress them.’ Trajan boarded a ship, and thought to come in 10 days, but there was a wind and he came in 5 days. He came and uncovered the Jews engaged in the learning of this verse: “The Lord will lift upon you a nation from remoteness, from the extremity of space, like the vulture swoops down...” (Deut 28:49) Trajan said to them: ‘I am he, the vulture who thought to come in ten days and was given by the wind in five days.’ He surrounded them with his legions, and he slew them.

This passage explores the terror of the return to bondage. It is a very precise kind of terror, the type of terror that can only be explained in the imagery of the Exodus and the breaking of its covenant. Upon fleeing Egypt and entering into the wilderness, revelation occurs, with all its blessings and curses. Here, *R* interprets the words of Moses in Exod 14:13 as definitive: “the Egyptians that you will see today you will never again see.” Similarly, Moses records two condemnations of the return to Egypt in Deut 17:16, saying you shall not “send people back to Egypt to add to his horses” and Deut 28:68, warning the Israelites that they will be returned to Egypt if the covenant is abandoned. *R* shows how each of these warnings are fulfilled in the times of the Prophets and the rabbis. Deut 17:16 is broken when King Hezekiah turns to Egypt for chariots and horses in front of the military might of Assyria. The words of the prophet Jeremiah in Jer 42:10 promise victory for the Judeans in the face of the Babylonian army if they remain in the land of Israel, but instead they turn towards Egypt for protection. Finally, we are offered the story of Trajan’s dead son and the Jews as an example of being returned to Egypt. The similarity between this story and the actual events of a Jewish insurrection in Egypt squashed by Trajan in the midst of his Parthian war are remarkably close, but the rebellion has been rabbinicized to fit into *R*’s narrative and larger project of showing the fulfillment of the curses of Deut 28.¹⁹ All these rabbis had to do to incur the wrath of Trajan was follow the rabbinic laws, celebrating the success of another Jewish revolt and despairing over a failed one.

1.4 Rav's Proem: Jews in Bondage

ואין קונה דברים כח, סח. למה אין קונה, רב אמר על ידי שלא הקנייתם דברי הברית, שאין בכם מי קונה דברי חמשה ספרי תורה, מנין של קונה. אמר רבי שמואל בר נחמן על ידי שחזרתי על כל האמות שבעולם ואין מי קונה דברי תורה פיצא בכם. אמר רבי שמואל בר יצחק אתם יש לכם קנין באמות העולם, שנאמר ויקרא כה, מה: וגם מבני התושבים הגרים עמכם מהם תקנו, אבל לאמות אין להם קנין בכם. ולמה יש לכם קנין באמות העולם, על ידי שהקנייתם אלה דברי הברית. ולמה אמות העולם אין להן קנין בכם, על ידי שלא קנו אלה דברי הברית. אמר רבי יונתן אתם יש לכם פטרונות, ומה הן אלה דברי הברית. אמר רבי יודא אתם טמיקא אתם, הלוקח לו עבד מן הטמיקא שוב אינו מתחייב בנפשו, שכן אחשורוש אומר לאשתו אסתר ח, ז: הנה בית המן נתתי לאסתר, ואמר רבי יודא בר רבי סימון על דפשט ידיה בטמיקא כן הנה ליה. אמר רבי יצחק מעשה בפרוצפיה באשה אחת שהיתה פודה את השבויים, באתה שבויה אחת ופדאתה, שניה, ופדאתה, וכיון שמטה ידה ולא היתה יכולה לפדות, מיד הקיפוח לגיונות והרגוה, וכל כך למה, כדי לזרז השבאים הבאים. רבי לוי ורבי יצחק, רבי לוי אומר מי לקח לו חבר ולמחר הוא להריגה, מי לקח לו אשה ולמחר היא להריגה. רבי יצחק אמר לעבדים ולשפחות אי אתם נקנין, אבל אתם נקנין להשמיד להרג ולאבד, שכן אסתר אומרת לאחשורוש: ואלו לעבדים ולשפחות נמכרנו וגו'. שכן כתב לנו משה רבנו בתורה דברים כח, סח: והתמכרתם שם לאיביכם לעבדים ולשפחות ואין קונה, שמא להשמיד להרג ולאבד, כיון שראו הכל התחילו צוחין ווי, ויהי, ווי שהיה בימי אחשורוש.

Lev 25:45 – “And also from the children of the dwellers, the strangers amongst you, from them you will possess, and from their families that are among you that were begot in your land. And they will become your property”
– This chapter contains many laws on slavery. The Israelites cannot be held by other Israelites as slaves but must instead be treated as a foreigner residing in your house. Male and female slaves are only permitted from the nations surrounding the Israelites²³
Est 8:7 – “And King Achashverosh said to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew: Behold, the house of Haman I have given to Esther, and he has been impaled upon the wood that he sent by his hand against the Jews”

did not possess – the Jews forfeit the covenant through disobedience
five – Rav understand the 7 at the end of the Hebrew word for “buyer” to mean the five books of Moses
as you do – all other nations refused the yoke of the covenant except the Jews
possess the peoples of the world – Deut 28:68 promises no buyers for the Israelites if they sell themselves as slaves in Egypt. Rabbi Shmuel bar Yitzchak connects this with the laws on slavery in Lev 25. Whereas the lack of a buyer in Deut. is intended as a curse, Rabbi Shmuel bar Yitzchak understands this as part of the privilege of possessing the covenant
protector – from the Latin root *pater*
the Crown property – from the Greek *tamiaca*, literally “belonging to the imperial treasury.” *R* uses foreign authoritative terms to describe God as a guardian or overlord of the Jews. For someone else to own a Jew is to steal God’s property
and all this why? – The woman of Pruzpiah was allowed to ransom captives, until business became bad for her and the government finally caught up. Similarly, Achashverosh gave power to the wicked Haman to destroy the Jews, only to have him impaled when he lost favor with the king

“And there will be no buyer...” (*Deut 28:68*) Why “and there will be no buyer?”

Rav said:

You did not possess the words of the covenant, not one of you possesses the words of the five books of Torah, counting the possessors

Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahman said:

I have seen all the peoples of the world, and not one of them possesses the words of Torah as you do

Rabbi Shmuel bar Yitzchak said:

You may possess the peoples of the world, as it is written: “And also from the children of the dwellers, the strangers amongst you, from them you will possess” (*Lev 25:45*) but with regard to the nations, they may not possess you. And why may you possess the nations of the world? Because you possessed those words of the covenant. And why may the nations of the world not possess you? Because they do not possess those words of the covenant

Rabbi Yonatan said:

You have a protector,²⁰ and what are they? Those words of the covenant

Rabbi Judah said:

You belong to the Crown property.²¹ One who takes a slave from the Crown property, there is no return. A debt is put on his life, like when Achashverosh says to his wife: “Behold, the house of Haman I have given to Esther” (*Est 8:7*)

And Rabbi Judah bar Rabbi Shimon said:

Thus, woe to Haman for stretching out his hand on the Crown’s property

Rabbi Yitzchak said:

A story from Pruzpiah,²² where a woman would ransom captives. One captive woman would come, and she ransomed her, a second, and she ransomed her. And when her business declined, and she could no longer ransom, the legionnaires surrounded her and slew her. And all this why? To warn the centers from coming

Est 7:4 – “Because we have been sold, myself and my people, to be destroyed, to be slaughtered, and to be wasted. And if only we had been sold as slaves and as handmaids, I would have kept silent, because the adversary is not worthy of the king’s trouble.”
– Esther’s plea to Achashverosh to save her people the Jews from the plot of Haman

a friend, a wife – Why did Achashverosh befriend Mordecai and marry Esther, only to have the Jews be put at risk of extermination by another high ranking official, Haman?
if only – *R* reads Est 7:4 as the fulfillment of Deut 28:68
and it was in the days – finally, *R* finishes Rav’s sermon with our base quote, tying the sermon together with this last tradition specifically about Esther. The main point of the sermon is to show that the days of Achashverosh contain the curses of Deuteronomy 28

Rabbi Levi and Rabbi Yitzchak discussed the verse (*Deut* 28:68)

Rabbi Levi said:

Why make a friend who is to be killed tomorrow? Who takes a wife who is to be killed tomorrow?

Rabbi Yitzchak said:

You will not be possessed as slaves and handmaids, but rather to be destroyed, slaughtered, and wasted, like when Esther said to Achashverosh: “And if only we had been sold as slaves and as handmaids,” (*Est* 7:4) like Moses our teacher wrote to us in the Torah: “And you will try to sell yourselves there to your enemies, as slaves and as handmaids, but there will be no buyer.” (*Deut* 28:68) What did he mean? To be destroyed, to be slaughtered, and to be wasted. When they saw thus, they gathered together and cried Woe! **And it was**, woe that was **in the days of Achashverosh**

Rav’s opening sermon frames the midrash’s reading of the book of Esther. The exegesis of *Deut* 28:66 introduces us to how Torah is evidenced in this midrash: in the life of the everyday Jew, in the political body of the Jewish people, and throughout Scripture, particularly in Esther for this collection. An argument is made for the realization of the curses of *Deut* 28 at different points in Jewish history, particularly “in the days of Achashverosh” as well as Roman times. Thus, the events of the book of Esther are contextualized in the repeated process of suffering by the Israelites own sins, framed in *Deut* 28 and throughout Torah and Rabbinic literature. The book of Esther becomes an example of this grand narrative of the Jewish people, and a testament to the lived experiences of Jews throughout time. In every verse of Esther there is a parallel or explicator in another part of the Jewish experience, whether that is found in real life, Torah, Aggadah, and so on. By the end of Rav’s sermon, the reader is grounded in the primary questions of this midrash: how does the book of Esther fit in the scope of Jewish history? How are the paradigms evident in Esther seen elsewhere throughout history and in our own day?

2. Samuel's Proem: Divine Attachment to Israel

שְׂמוּאֵל פָּתַח וַיִּקְרָא כו, מַד: וְאָף גַּם זֹאת בְּהִיוֹתְם בְּאֶרֶץ אֲיִבֵיהֶם לֹא מֵאֲסָתִים וְלֹא גְעֻלָּתִים לְכַלְתֶּם לְהַפֵּר בְּרִיתִי אִתְּם כִּי אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיהֶם. לֹא מֵאֲסָתִים בְּבִבְלָ, וְלֹא גְעֻלָּתִים בְּמִדְי, לְכַלְוֹתָם בְּיָוָן, לְהַפֵּר בְּרִיתִי אִתְּם בְּמַלְכוּת הַרְשָׁעָה. כִּי אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיהֶם לְעֵתִיד לְבֹא. תַּנִּי רַבִּי חַיָּא, לֹא מֵאֲסָתִים בְּיַמֵּי אֶסְפָּיאָנוּס, וְלֹא גְעֻלָּתִים בְּיַמֵּי טְרַקוּוֹיָנוּס, לְכַלְתֶּם בְּיַמֵּי הַמֶּן, לְהַפֵּר בְּרִיתִי אִתְּם בְּיַמֵּי רוֹמִיִּים, כִּי אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיהֶם בְּיַמֵּי גֹג וּמַגּוֹג.²⁴

Lev 26:43-44 – “And the land will be forsaken of them [Israelites], making up its sabbatical year by being desolate of them, while they atone for their iniquity; for the abundant reason that they rejected My rules and spurned My laws. Yet even then, when they were in the land of their enemies, I did not reject them, and I did not loathe them to smite them, to break my covenant with them, because I am the Lord their God.”

– This verse lists three ways which God never retracts God’s favor from the Israelites, paralleling the three warnings against returning to Egypt in Rav’s sermon

reject, Babylon – The Lord ultimately returned the Jews from Babylon

loathe, Media – The Lord did not let the Jews perish from the threat of Haman

smite, Greece – Even when first Antiochus Epiphanes and then the Hasmoneans desecrated the Temple, God still did not pull favor

kingdom of wickedness – This is Rome. Even with the fall of the Second Temple, the covenant still persists

designated – alluding to the coming of the Messiah and the resurrection of the dead at the end of days

Vespasian – Roman emperor during the fall of the Second Temple

Trajan – Who suppressed a series of Jewish revolts in the Diaspora

Romans – The breaking of the covenant has been associated with the Romans twice now. This is the moment in history when it came the closest to being broken

Gog and Magog – The apocalyptic enemies of Israel whom the Messiah will defeat in the end of days

Samuel opened: “Yet even then, when they are in the land of their enemies, I did not reject them, and I did not loathe them to smite them, to break my covenant with them, because I am the Lord their God.” (*Lev 26:44*)

“I did not reject them” – in Babylon, and

“I did not loathe them” – in Media,

“to smite them” – in Greece,

“to break my covenant with them” – in the kingdom of wickedness,

“because I am the Lord their God” – designated to come

Rabbi Chaya taught:

“I did not reject them” – in the days of Vespasian,²⁵ and

“I did not loathe them” – in the days of Trajan,

“to smite them” – in the days of Haman,

“to break my covenant with them” – in the days of the Romans

“because I am the Lord their God” – in the days of Gog and Magog²⁶

R positions Samuel’s sermon almost in response to the previous sermon. Rav’s sermon is suspiciously lacking in reference, implicitly and explicitly, to God’s salvation or Messianic expectation. Samuel, however, uses the same four kingdoms as Rav to show how God delivers Israel from each kingdom, never quite retracting God’s favor, and after the fourth wicked kingdom of Rome, the glorious end of days will surely come. Similarly, Rabbi Chaya’s exegesis shows how the Lord is present even under the rule of oppressive leaders, culminating in the ultimate struggle between good and evil against Gog and Magog in the end of days. Rav centered us in the reality of the midrash, that we exist in a cycle of destitution and apostasy for which all the curses of the Torah are coming true. Samuel dares to push this conviction to its logical limit: how does this cycle end?

3. Rabbi Judah bar Simon's Proem: Esther in Biblical History

רבי יודא בר רבי סימון פתח עמוס ה, יט: פאָשר ינוס איש מפני הארי, רבי הונא ורבי אחא בשם רבי חמא בר רבי חנינא, פאָשר ינוס איש מפני הארי וגו' זו בבבלי, על שם דניאל ז, ד: קדמיתא כאריה, ופגעו הדוב זו מדי, על שם דניאל ז, ה: וארו חיה אחרי תנינה דמיה לדב. רבי יוחנן אמר לדב פתיב, דא היא דעתיה דרבי יוחנן, דאמר רבי יוחנן ירמיה ה, ו: על כן הכם אריה מיער זו בבבלי ירמיה ה, ו: זאב ערבות ישדדם זו מדי. נמר שקד על עריהם זו יון. ירמיה ה, ו: כל היוצא מהנה יטרף זו אדום, עמוס ה, יט: וזאב הבית זה יון, שהיה הבית קים. ונשכו הנחש זו אדום, שנאמר ירמיה מו, כב: קולה כנחש ילה, וכן הוא אומר שיר השירים ה, ב: פתחי לי אחתי זו בבבלי. רעיתי זו מדי. יונתי ביון. תמתי באדום, שכל ימי יון היה בית המקדש קים, והיו ישראל מקריבין בו תורים ובני יונה על גבי המזבח. רבי פנחס ורבי לוי בשם רבי חמא בר חנינא פתרון, כתיב תהלים יח, ז: בצר לי אקרא ה' בבבלי, ואל אלהי אשוע במדי, ישמע מהיכלו קולי ביון. דאמר רבי הונא לגרמיה, יונתי במלכות יון, שכל ימי יון היה ההיכל קים והיו ישראל מקריבין תורים ובני יונה על גבי המזבח. הוי: ישמע מהיכלו קולי ושועתי לפניו תבוא באזניו במלכות אדום. דבר אחר, פאָשר ינוס איש מפני הארי זה נבוכדנצר, ופגעו הדב זה בלשצר, וזאב הבית וסמך ידו על הקיר ונשכו הנחש זה המן, שהיה נושף עמא כנחש, הדא הוא דכתיב עזרא ד, ח: רחום בעל טעם ושמי ספרא זה בנו של המן. עזרא ד, ח: כתבו אנגרה חדה לארתחששתא מלכא פנמא, ומה פתיב בה עזרא ד, כא: כען שימו טעם לבטלא וגו' עזרא ד, יג: מדה זו מדת הארץ, בלו זו פרוגיונו, והלה זו אנגריא, ואפתם מלכים תהנזק. רב הונא ורבי פנחס אמרין אפלו דברים שהמלכות מתפדה בהם, כגון בי טיאטראות ובי קרקסאות היא מזקת, כיון ששלה שמע ובטל מלאכת בית המקדש, וכיון שראו כה התחילו הכל צוחין וי, ויהי בימי אחשורוש²⁷

Amos 5:19 – “As a man flees from the face of the lion and a bear met him, or if he came into the house and laid his hand on the wall and the snake bit him”

– This verse is understood as referring to the succession of empires ruling over the Jews. They escape from one vicious beast only to be attacked by another

Dan 7:3-7 – “Four mighty beasts different from each other emerged from the sea. The first like a lion but with eagles’ wings... And behold, another beast, a second, that was like a bear... there was another one, like a leopard... there was a fourth beast— fearsome, dreadful, and very powerful, with great iron teeth”

– The four beasts of Daniel’s vision inspire the four kingdoms who rule over Israel like beasts

Jer 5:6 – “Therefore a lion will strike them down from the forest, the wolf of the desert will devastate them, a leopard is sleeplessly watching upon their cities, all who go out from them will be torn to pieces. For their transgressions are many, their rebellious acts unnumbered”

– Jeremiah is addressing the wealthy who refuse to hear the word of God, but again the four beasts are used as examples of empire

Jer 46:22 – “She shall rustle away, her sound like the snake moving as they come marching in force; They shall come against her with axes, like hewers of wood”

– A warning to Egypt of what befalls them when the Babylonians come

S.S 5:2 – “I was asleep, but my heart was awake.

My beloved knocks! – Open to me my dear, my beloved, my dove, my wholeness! For my head is drenched dew, my locks with the damp of night”

– R understands this verse in terms of the relationship between the people of Israel and God. Even when Israel was under the rule of any of the four kingdoms, God still loved them

Rabbi Judah bar Simon opened: “As a man flees from the face of the lion” (*Amos 5:19*)

Rabbi Huna and Rabbi Aha in the name of Rabbi Hama bar Rabbi Hanina

“As a man flees from the face of the lion” – This is Babylon, given: “The first like the lion” (*Dan 7:4*)

“And a bear met him” – This is Media, given: “And behold, another beast, a second, that was like a bear” (*Dan 7:5*)

Rabbi Yochanan said a tradition of his own regarding a bear:

“Therefore a lion will strike them down from the forest” (*Jer 5:6*) – This is Babylon

“A wolf²⁸ of the desert will devastate them” – This is Media

“A leopard is sleeplessly watching upon their cities” – This is Greece

“All who go out from them will be torn to pieces” – This is Edom

“And he came into the house” (*Amos 5:19*) – This is Greece, that was when the Temple stood

“And the serpent bit him” – This is Edom, as it is written:

“It’s sound like the snake moving” (*Jer 46:22*)

And also it says:

“Open to me my dear” (*S.S 5:2*) – This is Babylon

“My beloved” – This is Media

“My dove” – in Greece.

“My wholeness” – in Edom, that all the days of Greece were when the Temple of Holiness stood, and Israel offered oxen and young doves upon the back of the altar.

Ps 18:7 – “In my distress I will call on the Lord, and I will implore to my God; He will hear my voice from his temple, and my cry to him will come before his ear”

– Addressed to David after escaping the clutches of Saul, the narrator of the Psalm is ensnared by physical embodiments of Death, before the Lord flies down on a cherub, victoriously³⁴

Ezra 4:13 – “Now be it known to the king that if this city is rebuilt and the walls completed, the will not pay tribute, custom, or toll, and in the end the kingdom will suffer”

– This verse is taken from Rechum and Shimshi’s (reportedly Haman’s son) letter to King Artaxerxes, who *R* understands as Achashverosh. Because of this letter, Achashverosh stops the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the construction of the Second Temple

Nebuchadnezzar – *R* reapplies Amos 5:19 to the rulers of Persia who persecuted the Jews. Israel fled first before Nebuchadnezzar to Egypt

Belshazzar – The son of Nebuchadnezzar, whose viciousness is compared here to his father’s

Haman, like a snake – *R* considers Haman the next most deadly ruler in Persia, although he operates out of an administrative position within a different dynasty

poll-tax – from a Greek word referencing a gold and silver tax levied by Constantine the Great

force labor – from the Greek *angaria*, esp. seizure for public services and works

this city – According to this tradition, Achashverosh paused construction of Jerusalem, which was being rebuilt, because it did not sate his expensive appetites

in the days – this final proclamation confirms for us that all the events of Ezra which refer to Artaxerxes should be understood as occurring under Achashverosh’s reign

Rabbi Pinchas and Rabbi Levi interpreted in the name of Rabbi Hama bar Hanina:

“In my distress I will call on the Lord” (Ps 18:7) – in Babylon

“And I will implore to my God” – in Media

“He will hear my voice from His temple” – in Greece. Rabbi Huna said:
All the days of Greece the temple stood, and Israel offered turtle-doves and young doves upon the back of the altar. Thus – “He will hear my voice from His temple”

“And my cry to him will come before his ear” – in the kingdom of Edom

Another word:

“As a man flees from the face of the lion” (Amos 5:19) – This is Nebuchadnezzar

“And a bear met him” – This is Belshazzar

“And he came into the house and laid his hand upon the wall and the snake bit him” – This is Haman, who hisses fervently like a snake

Thus, as it is written:

“Rechum the chancellor and Shimshi the scribe” (Ezra 4:8) – Shimshi is the son of Haman²⁹

“They wrote one letter to King Artaxerxes in this manner” – And what is written in the letter? “Now put an edict to an end...” (Ezra 4:21)

“tribute” (Ezra 4:13) – This is the tax of the land

“custom” – This is the poll-tax³⁰

“and toll” – This is forced labor³¹

“and in the end the kingdom will suffer”

Rav Huna and Rabbi Pinchas said:

Even the things that the king entertains himself on, such as in theaters³² and circuses,³³ this city deplures.

When the king heard, he sent and suspended work on the House of Holiness, and when they saw thus everyone cried strongly ‘Woe!’ **And it was in the days of Achashverosh**

The sermon of Rabbi Judah bar Simon gives two interpretations of Amos 5:19: one coinciding with the analysis of the Four Kingdoms, as we’ve already seen, and the other revolving around the timeline of the events in the book of Esther. Through the thoughtful citation of the Prophets, the first interpretation shows the ark of exile and salvation as it continues to play out. The Four Kingdoms are first analyzed in terms of Amos 5:19 and Jer 5:6, two texts promising to punish the iniquities of the rich with attacks by wild animals. The metaphor is clear: Israel are the impious rich, and the wild animals wield the sharp teeth of imperial rule. Next, the Four Kingdoms are interpreted through S.S 5:2. God remains a lover of Israel despite God’s wooing of the Four Kingdoms to enact God’s punishment of Israel. But God never forgets the covenant: the Four Kingdoms understood through Ps 18:7 show a promise of redemption in every age, that the cry of Israel will reach God’s ear. The second interpretation of Amos 5:19 applies the verse to Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, and Haman, implying Haman is the heir apparent to the Babylonian kings, as opposed to Achashverosh. The sermon confirms that Artaxerxes in Ezra 4:7 is indeed Achashverosh, and that Haman’s son persuaded the foolish king to pause construction on the temple.

4. Rabbi Yitzchak's Proem: Righteous and Wicked Kings

רבי יצחק פתח משלי כט, ב: ברבות צדיקים ישמח העם ובמשל רשע יאנח עם, בשעה שהצדיקים נוטלין גדלה, חדוהו שמחה בעולם, וה בעולם, והמלך דוד, וה שמלך דוד. והמלך שלמה, וה שמלך שלמה. והמלך אסא, וה שמלך אסא. אלו במלכי ישראל, במלכי אמות העולם מנין, שנאמר עזרא א, ד: והמלך כורש, וה שמלך כורש. ובשעה שהרשעים נוטלין גדלה, וי ואנחה וחרון אף בעולם, מלכים א טז, כח: וימלך אחאב בן עמרי, וי שמלך אחאב בן עמרי. וימלך הושע בן אלה, וי שמלך הושע בן אלה, ירמיה לז, א: וימלך מלך צדקיהו בן יאשיהו, וי שמלך צדקיהו בן יאשיהו. במלכי אמות העולם, שנאמר ויהי בימי אחשורוש, וי שמלך אחשורוש

va – a declaration of joy

Asa – succeeded Abirajam as king of Judea, did what was righteous in the eyes of the Lord cf. 1 Kings 15:11

kings of the other peoples – *R* includes in this list of righteous Israelite kings an example of a benevolent Gentile ruler

Ahab – Called the wickedest of kings, he comes to power with his Phoenician wife Jezebel, and turns all of Judea towards sin. Prompts the rise of the prophet Elijah

Hosea – Judean king during the liquidation of the northern kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians

Zedekiah – Set up by Nebuchadnezzar rule as a vassal over the Jews remaining in the land of Israel after the exile. Does not heed the word of the Lord

Achashverosh – As Cyrus was an example of a righteous Gentile ruler, so Achashverosh is an example of a wicked Gentile ruler

Rabbi Yitzchak opened: “In the authority of the righteous, the people will rejoice, and in the rule of the wicked, the people will sigh” (*Prov 29:2*)

In the hour that the righteous receive greatness, joy, and happiness in the world, *va va* in the world

And when David was king – *Va* that David ruled

And when Solomon was king – *Va* that Solomon ruled

And when Asa was king – And *va* that is Asa ruled

These are for the kings of Israel, and these are for the kings of the other peoples of the world, that it is said:

“And Cyrus the king” (*Ezra 1:7*) – And *va* that Cyrus is king

And in the hour that the wicked receive greatness, woe, grief and anger in the world:

“Ahab son of Omri ruled” (*1 Kings 16:29*) – And woe that Ahab son of Omri ruled

And Hosea son of Alah ruled – And woe that Hosea son of Alah ruled

“And King Zedekiah, son of Josiah ruled” (*Jer 37:1*) – And woe that Zedekiah son of Josiah ruled

For the kings of the peoples of the world, it is also said:

And it was in the days of Achashverosh – And woe that Achashverosh ruled

Rabbi Yitzchak's sermon is determined to show the ineptitude of Achashverosh. Here, Achashverosh is compared to the wicked kings of the northern and southern kingdoms in the period of Kings. Consider here the relationship between Jews and Gentiles – they both have the capacity to be ruled by righteous and wicked kings.

5. Rabbi Levi's Proem: The Failure of Saul

רבי לוי פתח במדבר לג, נה: ואם לא תורישו את ישיבי הארץ מפניכם והיה אשר תותרו מהם, מדבר בשאול, בשעה שאמר לו שמואל שמואל א טו, ג: עתה לך והכית את עמלק, אמר ליה אזלת זכאה ואתית חייבא וחסת עלוי, שנאמר שמואל א טו, ט: ויחמל שאול והעם על אגג, והא צמחא קיימא מיניה שהוא עושה לכם דברים קשים, לשכים בעיניכם ולצנינם בצדיכם, ואיזה זה, זה המן, שאמר: להשמיד להרג ולאבד, וכיון שראו הפל פן, התחילו צוחין ווי, ויהי בימי אחשוורוש.

Num 33:55 – “But if you do not dispossess the inhabitants of the land from before you, it will be those that remain from them that will be a thicket to your eyes and cold water to your sides, and they shall harass you in the land in which you live”

1 Sam 15:2-3 – “Thus said the Lord of Hosts: I am exacting the penalty for what Amalek did to Israel, for the assault they made upon them on the road... Now go and smite Amalek, and take all that belongs to him. Spare no one, but kill alike men and women, infants and sucklings, oxen and sheep, camels and asses!”

1 Sam 15:9 – “And Saul and the people spared Agag... and all else that was of value. They would not proscribe them, they took only what was cheap and worthless”

as it is written –Rabbi Levi puts words in the mouth of the prophet condemning Saul. The prophet cites Scripture as evidence. The theological ramifications of this rhetorical move cannot be explored fully here.

Haman – Since he was descended from Amalek

Rabbi Levi opened: “And if you do not dispossess the inhabitants of the land from before you, it will be those that remain from them...” (*Num 33:55*)

A word on Saul, in the hour that Samuel said to him: “Now go and smite Amalek.” (1 Sam 15:3) Samuel said to Saul when he returned:

And you left guiltless but have returned a sinner³⁵ because you have spared Amalek, as it is written: “And Saul and the people spared Agag.” (1 Sam 15:9) Ha, a sprout grows out from he that does to you severe things: a thicket to your eyes and cold water to your sides

And who is this? This is Haman, who decrees “to destroy, to slaughter, and to lay waste” (Est 3:13)

And when they all saw thus, they cried strongly ‘Woe!’ **And it was in the days of Achashverosh**

Rabbi Levi shows how the plight of the Jews in the book of Esther is actually the climax of a long running saga between Israel and Amalek. Amalek first attacks Israel when they were defensive in the wilderness, becoming the mortal enemy of God and the Israelites. Saul is ordered to exterminate Amalek down to the last sheep, but refuses. The consequence of this failure is that an offshoot of Amalek, Haman, will harass the Jews in the future. The conflict spreads through Torah, to the Prophets, and finally ends with Esther. Num 33:55 foreshadows Saul’s failed genocide of Amalek, while Samuel prophesizes the coming of Haman.

6. Rabbi Hanina bar Ada's Proem: The Foolishness of Cyrus

רבי חנינא בר אדא פתח קהלת י, יב: דבְּרֵי פִי חָכָם חֵן זֶה כּוֹרֵשׁ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר עֲזַרְא א, ב: כֹּה אָמַר
 כָּרֵשׁ מְלֶךְ פָּרַס כָּל מַמְלָכוֹת הָאָרֶץ נָתַן לִי ה' אֱלֹהֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהוּא פָקֵד עָלַי לְבָנוֹת לֹו בֵּית בִּירוּשָׁלַיִם
 אֲשֶׁר בִּיהוּדָה. קהלת י, יב: וְשִׁפְתוֹת כָּסִיל תִּבְלַעְנֻוּ, שֶׁאָמַר עֲזַרְא א, ג: הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר
 בִּירוּשָׁלַיִם, קהלת י, יג: תְּחִלַּת דְּבָרֵי פִיהוּ סְכָלוֹת, מֵה הַסְּכָלוֹת עֲזַרְא א, ג: מִי בָכֶם בְּכָל עֲמוֹ יְהִי
 אֱלֹהֵיו עִמּוֹ. קהלת י, יג: וְאַחֲרֵית פִּיהוּ הוֹלָלוֹת רָעָה, דִּי גָזַר וְאָמַר דִּי עֲבַר פָּרַת עֲבַר וְדִי לֹא עֲבַר
 לֹא יַעֲבַר. דְּבַר אַחַר, תְּחִלַּת דְּבָרֵי וּגו', זֶה אַחֲשֻׁרוּשׁ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר עֲזַרְא ד, ו: וּבְמַלְכוּת אַחֲשֻׁרוּשׁ
 בְּתַחֲלַת מַלְכוּתוֹ קָתְבוּ שִׁטְנָה וּגו', וְאַחֲרֵית פִּיהוּ וּגו', שֶׁעָלָה וּבִטַּל מְלָאכַת בֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ, כִּינּוּן שֶׁרָאָה
 הַכֹּל כִּן הִתְחִילוּ צוֹחִין וּוי, וְיֵהִי בִימֵי אַחֲשֻׁרוּשׁ.³⁶

Eccl 10:12-13 – “The words of the mouth of the wise are grace, but the lips of a fool will devour him. The beginning of his talk is foolishness, and the ending of his talk is wicked madness”
Ezra 1:2-3 – “Thus said Cyrus, king of Persia: ‘All the kingdoms of the earth were given to me by the Lord, God of the Heavens. And He called upon me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, that is in Judea. Who among you, among all of His people, his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem that is in Judea and build the House of the Lord, God of Israel, the God that is in Jerusalem”

fool, in Jerusalem – Cyrus betrays his foolishness by assuming God is only in Jerusalem
who among you – Cyrus was meant to gather in all the exiles and return them to Israel, cf. Isa. 44:28, but he only allows those who wish to return
crossed the Euphrates – Those Jews who returned to the land of Israel initially were allowed to stay there, but if later a Jew from Babylon tried to return, their path was blocked
abolished – Again, *R* refers to the events of Ezra 4, showing how Achashverosh’s stoppage of the construction of the temple was wicked and foolish

Rabbi Hanina bar Ada opened:

“The words of the mouth of the wise are grace” (Eccl 10:12) – This is Cyrus, of whom it is said: “Thus said Cyrus, king of Persia: ‘All the kingdoms of the earth the Lord has given me, God of the Heavens. And He called upon me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, that is in Judea” (Ezra 1:2)

“But the lips of a fool will devour him” (Eccl 10:12) – Because Cyrus said: “He is the God that is in Jerusalem” (Ezra 1:3)

“The beginning of his talk is foolishness” (Eccl 10:13) – What is foolishness? “Who among you, among all of His people, his God be with him” (Ezra 1:3)

“The ending of his talk is wicked madness” – Because he decreed and he said that one who crossed the Euphrates may remain across, but one who has not crossed will not cross

Another word:

“The beginning of his talk is foolishness” (Eccl 10:13 – This is Achashverosh, as it is said: “And in the kingdom of Achashverosh in the beginning of his rule, they wrote an accusation...” (Ezra 4:6) And “the ending of his talk is wicked madness” (Eccl 10:13) – That is Achashverosh rose up and abolished his work on the House of Holiness.³⁷

And when they all saw thus, they cried strongly ‘Woe!’ **And it was in the days of Achashverosh**

Rabbi Hanina bar Ada reads the proclamation of Cyrus in Ezra 1:2-4 with Eccl 10:12-13, showcasing a tradition of the failure of Cyrus. An important intertext is Isa 44:28-45:1, where Deutero-Isaiah records God describing Cyrus as his “anointed one,” his Messiah. This is a difficult concept for the rabbis to comprehend: a Gentile king, anointed by God? Thus there is an attempt to show how Cyrus was deficient as the anointed king. Like Saul, who failed to completely exterminate Amalek, Cyrus failed to complete the return of the Jews to Israel. Was it because of this that the Temple was not built until the rule of Darius, and the events in the days of Achashverosh occurred? Rabbi Hanina bar Ada may imply as much. A radical idea: Achashverosh was raised over the Jews because of no fault of their own, but rather because of the iniquities of a Gentile king.

7. Rabbi Judah bar Simon's Second Proem: The Hour of the Hypocrite King

רבי יודא ברבי סימון פתח איוב לד, ל: ממלך אדם חנף ממקשי עם, רבי יוחנן וריש לקיש, רבי יוחנן אמר בשעה שהמלך חנף ומושל על הבריות, ממקשי עם, מן קשיותיהן וחוביהן דבריתא די לא עבדין רעותיה דברייא עלמא, רבי שמעון בן לקיש אומר נוח להן לבריות להגדיל להן כנפים ולפרח באויר, ואל ימסרו וישתעבדו תחת יד מלך חנף. דבר אחר, ממלך אדם חנף, זה אחשורוש, שהיה חנף, שהרג את אשתו מפני אהבו, ופעם אחרת הרג את אהבו מפני אשתו. אבא אורין איש צידן אמר חמשה דברים משם רבן גמליאל, מן דסגו דיניי שקרא סגון סהדי שקרא. מן דסגון דלטוריא סגין ממונהון דברייא מתבזזה. מדסגו אפייה חציפתא, איתנסיב הודא והדרא ויקרא מן בריתא. מן דאכעסון בנאי חביביא עובדיהון קדם אבוהון דבשמיא, אקים עליהון מלכא חנפא ויתפרע מנהון, ואי זה זה אחשורוש. וכיון שראו הפל פן, התחילו צוחין וי, ויהי בימי אחשורוש.³⁸

Job 34:29-31 – “And when He is silent, who will condemn? And when He hides His face, who will see him? Be it a nation or one man who, despite the rule of an impious man, despite the ensnarement of the people, has said to God: ‘I will bear [my punishment] and offend no more’”

in the hour – impious kings come to power through the impious acts of the people
to surrender – an impious king does not allow humanity to reach its potential
slew his wife for his friend – This is when Achashverosh removed Vashti, and killed her according to this midrash, at Memucan’s suggestion, cf. Est 1:21
slew his friend for his wife – When Achashverosh killed Haman at Esther’s request, cf. Est 7:7
faithless informers –
from the time of creation – Corroborating the words of the Prophets, Rabban Gamaliel clearly states that empires are raised over the Jews for their sins by God. *R* implies that this is the case *in the days of Achashverosh*

Rabbi Judah bar Rabbi Simon opened: “From from the rule of an impious man, from the ensnarer of the people” (Job 34:30)

Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish discuss this verse.

Rabbi Yochanan said:

In the hour the hypocrite king rules over creation, it is snares to the people because of their severe and punishable words that their desire was not to serve the Creator of the World³⁹

Rabbi Simon ben Lakish says:

It would be easier for creation to grow wings and to bloom in empty space than to surrender and serve under the hand of a hypocrite king

Another thing on “From the rule of an impious man”

This is Achashverosh, for he was impious because he slew his wife for his friend, and another time slay his friend for his wife

Abba Urion, man of Sidon, said five things in the name of Rabban Gamaliel:

When corrupt judges multiply, there will be a plague of false witness
 When faithless informers increasingly multiply, the people’s share will be robbed

When the faithless of the witnesses act irreverently, thanksgiving and order are seized

And it has been said since the time of creation:

When the cherished sons displease their Father in Heaven with their actions, a hypocrite king will be established among them, and he will cause them to be destroyed

And who is this? This is Achashverosh. And when they all saw thus, they cried strongly ‘Woe’ **And it was in the days of Achashverosh**

A theological paradox emerges in the traditions of Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish. The petichta so far has gone to great lengths to prove how desperately horrible the days of Achashverosh, and the days of Trajan and the Roman occupation, were for the Jews. These were days of constant fear and uncertainty, without the possibility of observing the commandments to their fullest extent. It seems that these conditions were ordered by God for the Jews. God raised Nebuchadnezzar to punish Judah, and God raised Achashverosh over the Jews as well. Rabban Gamaliel states this formulation clearly for us in this passage. Yet, Resh Lakish says creation cannot grow under imperial rule. Israel appears to be stuck in an endless loop: God raises an impious king over Israel because of their iniquities, and under imperial rule Israel cannot grow past them. God will not allow for Israel to perish completely, Death will never quite own them, so then how does the cycle end?

8.1 Rabbi Berekiah's Proem: A Place for All

רבי בְּרִיקְיָה פָּתַח יִשְׁעֵיהּ מֵא, ד: מִי פְעַל וְעָשָׂה קָרָא הַדְּרוֹת מֵרֵאשׁ וְגו', מִתְחַלֵּת בְּרִיתוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם הַתְּקִין הַקְּדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא לְכָל אֶחָד וְאֶחָד מֵה שְׂרָאֵי לוֹ, אָדָם רֵאשׁ לְיִצְרָאִים, קִין רֵאשׁ לְהוֹרְגִים, הֶבֶל רֵאשׁ לְנֹהֲרָגִים, נֹחַ רֵאשׁ לְנִמְלָטִים, אַבְרָהָם רֵאשׁ לְמוֹלִים, יִצְחָק רֵאשׁ לְנִעְקָדִים, יַעֲקֹב רֵאשׁ לְתַמִּימִים, יְהוּדָה רֵאשׁ לְשִׁבְטִים, יוֹסֵף רֵאשׁ לְחִסְדִּים, אֶהֱרָן רֵאשׁ לְכֹהֲנִים, מֹשֶׁה רֵאשׁ לְנְבִיאִים, יְהוֹשֻׁעַ רֵאשׁ לְכוֹבְשִׁים, עֲתַנְיָאֵל רֵאשׁ לְמַחְלָקִים, שְׁמוּאֵל לְמוֹשְׁחִים, שָׂאוּל לְנִמְשָׁחִים, דָּוִד רֵאשׁ לְמַנְגְּנִים, שְׁלֹמֹה רֵאשׁ לְבוֹנִים, נְבוּכַדְנֶצַּר רֵאשׁ לְמַחְרִיבִים, אַחַשְׁוֵרֶשׁ רֵאשׁ לְמוֹכְרִים, הֶמֶן רֵאשׁ לְקוֹנִים, וְכִיּוֹן שְׂרָאֵי הַכָּל כֵּן, הַתְּחִלּוּ צוֹחִין וּי, וְיֵהִי בֵימֵי אַחַשְׁוֵרֶשׁ.

Isa 41:4 – “Who has done, and who has made? Calling the generations from the beginning? I, the Lord, who was first, and I am He the last”
– Rabbi Berekiah uses the second half of Isa 41:4 to show how each figure in Biblical history has their specific place, as God’s place is to be first and last

Adam – Gen 2:7
Cain, Abel – Gen 4:8
Noah – Gen 6:18
Abraham – Gen 17:24
Isaac – Gen 22:9
Jacob – Gen 32:39
Judah – Gen 49:10
Joseph – Gen 49:26
Aaron – Lev 8:2
Moses – Deut 34:10
Joshua – Josh 1:2
Othniel – Judg 1:13-14
Samuel, Saul – 1 Sam 10:1
David – The book of Psalms is attributed to David
Solomon – 1 Kings 5
Nebuchadnezzar – Jer 52:4
Achashverosh, Haman – “And Haman said to King Achashverosh: ‘There is a certain people, scattered and dispersed among the other peoples in all the provinces of your realm, whose laws are different from those of any other people and who do not obey the king’s laws; and it is not in the King’s interest to tolerate them. If it please the King, let an edict be drawn for their destruction, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver to the stewards for deposit in the royal treasury.’
Thereupon the king removed his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the foe of the Jews” (Est 3:8-10)

Rabbi Berekiah opened: “Who has done and who has made? Calling the generations from the beginning?” (*Isa 41:4*)
From the beginning of His creation of the world, the Holy One blessed is He set for all a place, a place He saw fit:

Adam, the first of the formed,
Cain, the first of the slayers,
Abel, the first of the slain,
Noah, the first of those saved
Abraham, the first of the circumcised
Isaac, the first of those put on the altar,
Jacob, the first of the whole,
Judah, the head of the tribes,
Joseph, the first of the wise,
Aaron, the first of the priests,
Moses, the first of the prophets,
Joshua, the first of the conquerors,
Othniel, the first of the divider,
Samuel, the first of the anointers,
Saul, the first of the anointed,
David, the first of the singer of Psalms,
Solomon, the first of the builders,
Nebuchadnezzar, the first of the destroyers,
Achashverosh, the first of the sellers,
Haman, the first of the buyers

And when they all saw thus, they cried strongly ‘Woe!’ **And it was in the days of Achashverosh**

Rabbi Berekiah begins his sermon by contextualizing the place of individuals in time: each is assigned a place, a significance in God’s eyes. Biblical figures are offered as examples, leading chronologically to Achashverosh and Haman. Their signifying trait? Achashverosh, the first of rulers to sell out part of his population for monetary gain, and Haman, the first of the fascists, consolidating power in the Persian empire through the demonizing of a singular nationality

8.2 Rabbi Berekiah's Proem: What occurs when "and it was in the days" appears in Torah?

רבי תנחומא ורבי ברכיה ורבי חייא רבה בשם רבי אלעזר פתרון, המדרש הזה עלה בידינו מן הגולה, כל מקום שנאמר ויהי אינו אלא צרה. ורבי שמואל בר נחמן בשם רבי יונתן פתח מדרש זה עלה בידינו, כל מקום שנאמר ויהי בימי, אינו אלא צרה. אמר רבי שמואל בר נחמן וחסד המשה הן, **בראשית יד, א**: ויהי בימי אמרפל, ומה צרה היתה שם עשו מלחמה וגו'. לאוהבו של מלך שהיה שריו במדינה, ובשבילו המלך נזקק למדינה, וכיון שבאו ברברין ונזדווגו לו, אמרו ווי שאין המלך נזקק למדינה כמות שהיה עושה. כך אברהם אבינו אוהבו של הקדוש ברוך הוא, **בראשית יב, ג**: ונברכו בך כל משפחת האדמה וברזעך. ובשבילו היה הקדוש ברוך הוא נזקק לכל עולמו, הן הוא דכתיב **בראשית יד, ז**: וישבו ויבאו אל עין משפט הוא קדש, לא בקשו להזדוג אלא לגלגל עינו של עולם, עין שעשתה מדת הדין בעולם בקשו לסמותה, הוא קדש, אמר רבי אחא הוא קתיב, הוא שקדש שמו של הקדוש ברוך הוא וירד לכבשן האש, כיון שראו הכל שבאו כל המלכים ונזדווגו לו, התחילו צוחין ווי, ויהי בימי אמרפל.

Gen 14:1-2 – “And it was in the days of Amraphel, king of Shinar, Arioch king of Ellasar, Chedorlaomer king of Elam, and Tidal king of Goyim, they made war on Bera king of Sodom, Birsha king of Gomorrah, Shinah king of Admah, Shemeber king of Zeboiim, and King Bela, she of Zoar”

– The war of the five kings, in which Abram’s cousin Lot is captured by the forces of Amraphel, and Abram rescues him⁴¹

Gen 12:3 – “And I will bless the ones who bless you and curse him that curses you, and in you all of the families of the earth will be blessed”

Babylon – Rabbis Tanchuma, Berekiah, Chaya Rabbah, Eleazar, Samuel bar Nachman, and Yonatan all resided in the land of Israel, but were in contact with the intellectually affluent Babylonian Jewish community. Yonatan and Eleazar, those of the generation of Hadrian’s persecution, had to flee to Babylon for their lives.⁴²

all the places – meaning all the places it says “and it was” or “and it was in the days of” in Scripture

ceased – A king used to visit a town but was attacked there and never came there again. This is a parable for what could have occurred to God’s attribute of justice on earth “in the days of Amraphel”

sought to poison – Amraphel and the five kings sought to rid justice from the world and flood it with cruelty. The midrash reads Ein-Mishpat literally as “eyes of judgement,” rather than as a proper noun

descended to the fiery furnace – Abraham rushed to the defense of justice from the five kings

Woe! – If Abraham were killed, no one would be left on earth to worship God

Rabbi Tanchuma, Rabbi Berekiah and Rabbi Chaya Rabbah in the name of Rabbi Eleazar taught:

This midrash rose up in our hands from Babylon: All the places that it says “and it was” there is not anything except distress

And Rabbi Samuel bar Nachman in the name of Rabbi Yonatan taught:

This midrash rose up in our hands: All the places that it says “and it was in the days” there is not anything except distress

Rabbi Samuel bar Nachman said: There are five times “and it was in the days” raises distress:

“And it was in the days of Amraphel” (Gen 14:1) And what distress was there? “They made war...” (Gen 14:2)

This is like a beloved friend of the king that went about in a province, and for the friend’s sake the king would engage with the province. And when barbarians⁴⁰ came and attacked the king while he was in the town, and the townspeople said: ‘Woe that the king will no longer come to this province as he did.’

This was about Abraham, our father, the beloved of the Holy One, blessed is He:

“And in you all of the families of the earth will be blessed” (Gen 12:3) and in your offspring. And for Abraham’s sake the Holy One, blessed is He, engaged with all of His world.

It is then written:

“And they [Amraphel and his army] resided and when they came to Ein-Mishpat which was Kadesh...” (Gen 14:7) And they did not seek to attack but only to reveal His eye to the world, the eye that was made from justice. They sought to poison the justice of the world.

“Which was Kadesh” (Gen 14:7) R. Aha said:

This is written *hu*, because Abraham set apart the name of the Holy One, blessed is He, and Abraham descended to the fiery furnace

When they all saw that these kings came and attacked Abraham, everyone cried strongly ‘Woe!’ “And it was in the days of Amraphel”

רות א, א: וַיְהִי בִימֵי שְׁפֹט הַשְּׁפֹטִים, וּמָה צָרָה הָיְתָה שָׁם, וַיְהִי רָעַב בְּאֶרֶץ, לַמְדִינָה שֶׁהָיְתָה חִבְתָּ לִפְסֵי מֶלֶךְ, וְשָׁלַח הַמֶּלֶךְ גְּבַאי טִמְיוֹן לְגִבּוֹתָהּ, מִה עָשׂוּ בְנֵי הַמְדִינָה, תָּלוּ אוֹתוֹ וְהָכּוּ אוֹתוֹ וְגִבּוּ אוֹתָהּ. אָמְרוּ וַיִּי לְכַשְׁיִרְגִישׁ הַמֶּלֶךְ בְּדַבְרֵים הַלְלוּ, מָה שִׁשְׁלוּחֹוֹ שֶׁל מֶלֶךְ מִבְּקֵשׁ לַעֲשׂוֹת לָנוּ עֲשִׂינוּ לוֹ. כִּי כָּשֶׁהִיָּה אֶחָד מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל הִיָּה עוֹשֶׂה דְבָרִים שְׂאֵלָ כְּרָאוּי מוֹלִיכִין אוֹתוֹ אֶל הַדִּין, וּמָה שֶׁהָדִין מִבְּקֵשׁ לַעֲשׂוֹת לְנִשְׁפֹּט הִיָּה הַנִּשְׁפֹּט עוֹשֶׂה לְדִין, אָמַר לָהֶם הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא אֲתֶם מִבְּזִים אֶת שׁוֹפְטֵיכֶם חַיִּיכֶם שְׂאֵנִי מִבִּיא עֲלֵיכֶם דָּבָר שְׂאֵין אֲתֶם יְכוּלִין לַעֲמֹד בּוֹ, וְאִיזָה זֶה, זֶה הַרְעַב, שְׂנֵאֲמַר: וַיְהִי בִימֵי שְׁפֹט הַשְּׁפֹטִים וַיְהִי רָעַב בְּאֶרֶץ.

Ruth 1:1 – “And it was in the days of the judging of the judges, and there was famine in the land. And a man from Bethlehem in Judah went to reside in the fields of Moab, him and his wife and his two sons”

“And it was in the days of the judging of the judges” (Ruth 1:1) And what distress was there? “And there was famine in the land”

This is like a province that was storing tributes to the king, and the king sent a tax-collector to collect them. What did the people of the province do? They hanged him and stuck him, and they collected the tribute for themselves. And they said: ‘Woe to us if the king is agitated about this, hallelujah! What the emissary of the king sought to do to us, we did to him!’

emissary of the king – In this parable, the judges who governed Israel in the time of Ruth are thought of as the King’s tax collectors. When the people rebel against the tax collector, they rebel against the king. When Israel rebels against God’s chosen judge, they rebel against God.

Thus, when an Israelite does something wrong, they take him to the judge. And what the judge seeks to do to the judged, the judged does to the judge. The Holy One, blessed is He, said to the Israelites:

You spurn your judges. I swear that I will bring upon you something that not one of you will be able to stand.

And what kind of thing is this? This is famine, as it is said: “And it was in the days of the judging of the judges, and there was famine in the land”

ישעיה ז, א: וַיְהִי בִימֵי אַחַז, וּמָה צָרָה הָיְתָה שָׁם, דְּכַתִּיב **ישעיה ט, יא:** אָרַם מִקֶּדֶם וּפְלִשְׁתִּים מֵאַחֲרֵי, לְמֶלֶךְ שְׁמֹסֵר בְּנוֹ לְפָדְגוֹג וְהָיָה פָדְגוֹג שׁוֹנֵא אוֹתוֹ, אָמַר אִם אֲנִי הוֹרְגוּ אֲנִי מִתְחַיֵּב מִיָּתָה לְמֶלֶךְ, אֲלֵא הַרִינִי מוֹשֵׁךְ מִיִּנְקִתוֹ מִמֶּנּוּ וְהוּא מֵת מֵאֲלִיו. כִּי אָמַר אַחַז אִם אֵין גְּדִיִּים אֵין תִּישִׁים אִם אֵין תִּישִׁים אֵין צֶאֱן, אִם אֵין צֶאֱן אֵין רוּעָה אִם אֵין רוּעָה אֵין עוֹלָם מִתְקִים, כִּי הִיָּה אַחַז סְבוּר וְאוֹמֵר אִם אֵין קִטְנִים אֵין גְּדוֹלִים, אִם אֵין גְּדוֹלִים אֵין תְּלַמִּידִים, אִם אֵין תְּלַמִּידִים אֵין חֲכָמִים, אִם אֵין חֲכָמִים אֵין זְקֵנִים, אִם אֵין זְקֵנִים אֵין תּוֹרָה, אִם אֵין תּוֹרָה אֵין בְּתִי כְּנִסְיֹת וּבְתִי מְדַרְשׁוֹת, אִם אֵין בְּתִי כְּנִסְיֹת וּמְדַרְשׁוֹת אֵין הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מִשְׁרָה שְׂכִינְתוֹ בְּעוֹלָם, מִה עָשָׂה עֲמַד וְנִעַל כָּל בְּתִי כְּנִסְיֹת וּמְדַרְשׁוֹת שְׂאֵלָ לְהִתְעַסֵּק בְּתוֹרָה, הִדָּא הוּא דְכַתִּיב **ישעיה ח, טז:** צוֹר תַּעֲוֶדָה חֲתוּם תּוֹרָה בְּלַמְדִי. רַבִּי הוּנָא בְּשֵׁם רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר אָמַר לְמָה נִקְרָא שְׁמוֹ אַחַז, שְׂאֲחַז בְּתִי כְּנִסְיֹת וּמְדַרְשׁוֹת. רַבִּי יַעֲקֹב בַּר אֲבָא בְּשֵׁם רַבִּי אַחָא שְׁמַע לָהּ מִן הַדִּין קָרָא, דְכַתִּיב **ישעיה ח, יז:** וְחִפְתִּי לָהּ הַמִּסְתִּיר פְּנֵי מִבֵּית יַעֲקֹב וְקִוִּיתִי לוֹ, אֵין לָךְ שְׁעָה שֶׁהָיְתָה קִשָּׁה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּאוֹתָהּ שְׁעָה, שְׂנֵאֲמַר **דברים לא, יח:** וְאֲנִי הִסְתַּר אֶסְתִּיר אֶת פְּנֵי בִיּוֹם הַהוּא עַל כָּל הַרְעָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וְגו', וּמֵאוֹתָהּ שְׁעָה קִוִּיתִי לוֹ, דְכַתִּיב: כִּי לֹא תִשְׁכַּח מִפִּי זְרַעוֹ, וּמָה אֶת מוֹעִיל **ישעיה ח, יח:** הִנֵּה אֲנִי וְהַיְלָדִים אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לִי ה' לְאִתּוֹת וּלְמוֹפְתִים בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל, וְכִי יִלְדִיו הָיוּ וְהָלָא לֹא הָיוּ אֲלֵא תְלַמִּידִיו, אֲלֵא מִכָּאן שֶׁתְּלַמִּידוֹ שֶׁל אָדָם נִקְרָא בְנוֹ, וְכִינן שְׂרָאוּ הַכֹּל שְׂאֲחַז בְּתִי כְּנִסְיֹת וּבְתִי מְדַרְשׁוֹת, הִתְחִילוּ אוֹמְרִים וַיְהִי בִימֵי אַחַז. **ישעיה ז, א:** וַיְהִי בִימֵי אַחַז, וּמָה צָרָה הָיְתָה שָׁם, דְכַתִּיב **ישעיה ט, יא:** אָרַם מִקֶּדֶם וּפְלִשְׁתִּים מֵאַחֲרֵי, לְמֶלֶךְ שְׁמֹסֵר בְּנוֹ לְפָדְגוֹג וְהָיָה פָדְגוֹג שׁוֹנֵא אוֹתוֹ, אָמַר אִם אֲנִי הוֹרְגוּ אֲנִי מִתְחַיֵּב מִיָּתָה לְמֶלֶךְ, אֲלֵא הַרִינִי מוֹשֵׁךְ מִיִּנְקִתוֹ מִמֶּנּוּ וְהוּא מֵת מֵאֲלִיו. כִּי אָמַר אַחַז אִם אֵין גְּדִיִּים אֵין תִּישִׁים אִם אֵין תִּישִׁים אֵין צֶאֱן, אִם אֵין צֶאֱן אֵין רוּעָה אִם אֵין רוּעָה אֵין עוֹלָם מִתְקִים, כִּי הִיָּה אַחַז סְבוּר וְאוֹמֵר אִם אֵין קִטְנִים אֵין גְּדוֹלִים, אִם אֵין גְּדוֹלִים אֵין תְּלַמִּידִים, אִם אֵין תְּלַמִּידִים אֵין חֲכָמִים, אִם אֵין חֲכָמִים אֵין זְקֵנִים, אִם אֵין זְקֵנִים אֵין תּוֹרָה, אִם אֵין תּוֹרָה אֵין בְּתִי כְּנִסְיֹת וּבְתִי מְדַרְשׁוֹת, אִם אֵין בְּתִי כְּנִסְיֹת וּמְדַרְשׁוֹת אֵין הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מִשְׁרָה שְׂכִינְתוֹ בְּעוֹלָם, מִה עָשָׂה עֲמַד וְנִעַל כָּל בְּתִי כְּנִסְיֹת וּמְדַרְשׁוֹת שְׂאֵלָ לְהִתְעַסֵּק בְּתוֹרָה, הִדָּא הוּא דְכַתִּיב **ישעיה ח, טז:** צוֹר תַּעֲוֶדָה חֲתוּם תּוֹרָה בְּלַמְדִי. רַבִּי הוּנָא בְּשֵׁם רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר אָמַר לְמָה נִקְרָא שְׁמוֹ אַחַז, שְׂאֲחַז בְּתִי כְּנִסְיֹת וּמְדַרְשׁוֹת. רַבִּי

יעקב בר אבא בשם רבי אחא שמע לה מן הדין קרא, דכתיב ישעיה ח, יז: וּחִפִּיתִי לָהּ הַמִּסְתִּיר פְּנֵיו מִבֵּית יַעֲקֹב וְקִוִּיתִי לוֹ, אִין לָךְ שַׁעָה שְׁהִיתָה קָשָׁה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּאוֹתָהּ שַׁעָה, שְׁנֹאֲמַר דְּבָרִים לָא, יח: וְאַנְכִי הִסְתֵּר אֶסְתִּיר אֶת פְּנֵי בִיּוֹם הַהוּא עַל כָּל הַרְעָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וְגו', וּמֵאוֹתָהּ שַׁעָה קִוִּיתִי לוֹ, דְּכָתִיב: כִּי לֹא תִשְׁכַּח מִפִּי זִרְעוֹ, וְיָמָה אֶת מוֹעֵיל יִשְׁעִיהָ ח, יח: הִנֵּה אֲנִי וְהִלְדִּים אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לִי ה' לְאֹתוֹת וּלְמוֹפְתִים בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל, וְכִי יִלְדִּיו הִיוּ וְהִלָּא לֹא הִיוּ אֲלָא תַלְמִידֵיו, אֲלָא מִכָּאן שְׁתַּלְמִידוֹ שֶׁל אָדָם נִקְרָא בְּנוֹ, וְכִינּוּן שְׁרָאוֹ הַכֹּל שְׁאַחַז בְּתֵי כְּנִסְיֹת וּבְתֵי מְדַרְשׁוֹת, הַתְּחִילוּ אוֹמְרִים וַי, וְיָהּ בִּימֵי אֲחַז.

his tutor was an enemy to him – In this third parable, again the king is God, his son the nation of Israel, and the vindictive tutor is Ahaz. Ahaz removes the bronze altar from the temple and replaces it with one designed after the Assyrian fashion, cf. 2 Kings 16:13

Shekhinah – The feminine aspect of God, akin to the Holy Spirit, which descends upon the earth as the presence of God. In the wake of the destruction of the Temple, rabbinic theology stated that contact with the Shekhinah was attainable only through Torah study and prayer

closed all the synagogues and houses of study – This tradition rabbinicizes the predicament of Ahaz. He does not wish for a sign from God, so using rabbinic reasoning, he concludes that the synagogues and houses of study need to be closed, so that God's presence could not be felt. This is despite the Temple being still standing, and synagogues and houses of study being a rabbinic development

Ahaz – The *heb.* root of this name means “to close”

a miracle in Israel – Having already rabbinicized the wickedness of Ahaz, this tradition does the same to Isaiah and his child. Isaiah's child is not really his child, but his student. The prophet's relationship with his student allows for the Shekhinah to be felt on earth

Isa 9:11-12 – “Aram from the East, and Philistia from the west. And they devoured Israel with all of their mouths. Yet His anger did not turn back, and His hand is outstretched still”

– The tribe of Ephraim aligns themselves with the Arameans and God offers a sign to Ahaz. Ahaz refuses, but God gives a sign anyway. Isaiah conceives a son by a propheticess, to whom God promises that before the boy learns good from evil, and when he calls his parents by their names, then the northern kingdoms of Israel will be destroyed by Assyria

Isa 8:13-14,16-17 – “None but the Lord of Hosts will consider you holy. Him you will revere and him you will hold in awe. And he will be a sanctuary, a stricken stone and rock stumbled over by the masses, the two houses of Israel, and a trap and a snare for the residents of Jerusalem... Bind the testimony, seal the Torah with my students – And I will wait for the Lord, the one that hides His face from the house of Jacob, and I will look for him. Behold, I and the children that the Lord gave to me as a sign and for portents in Israel from with the Lord of Hosts, that dwells on Mount Zion”

Deut 31:18 – “And I will surely hide my face on that day when all the wicked that they have done because their face turned to other gods”

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“And it was in the days of Ahaz” (Isa 7:1) And what distress was there? As it is written: “Aram from the East and Philistia from the West” (Isa 9:11)

This is like a king that handed his son to a tutor,⁴³ and his tutor hated him. The tutor said: ‘If I slay him, I will be put to death by the king. Rather, behold, I will withdraw his wet nurse from him, and he will die from it.’

Thus Ahaz said:

If there are no kids, there are no he-goats. If there are no he-goats, there is no flock. If there is no flock, there is no shepherd. If there is no shepherd, the world cannot be established

Ahaz was imagining, and said:

If there are no children, there are grown-ups. If there are no grown-ups, there are none to learn from them. If there is no one to learn, there are no wise ones. If there are no wise ones, there are no elders. If there are no elders, there is no Torah. If there is no Torah, there are no synagogues and house of study. If there are no synagogues and houses of study, the Holy One, blessed is He, will not cause the Shekhinah⁴⁴ to rest in the world

What did Ahaz do?

He stood and he closed all the synagogues and houses of study,⁴⁵ so that none could occupy themselves in Torah, as it is written: “Bind the testimony, seal the Torah with my students” (Isa 8:16)

Rabbi Huna in the name of Rabbi Eleazar said:

Why do we call him Ahaz? Because he closed the synagogues and houses of study

Rabbi Jacob bar Abba in the name of Rabbi Aha heard a similar lesson in this verse: “And I will wait for the Lord, the one that hides His face from the house of Jacob, and I will look for him” (Isa 8:17)

Isaiah said:

There was not an hour so difficult for Israel as that hour, as it says: “And I will surely hide my face on that day when all the wicked...” (Deut 31:18) And from the hour I looked for Him, it is written: “Because it will not be discarded from the face of his progeny.” (Deut. 31:21) And what will you, Ahaz, defraud? “Behold, I and the child that the Lord gave to me are signs for miracles in Israel” (Isa 8:18)

And because they were his children, rather were they not his students? From this we find that the student of a man is called his son

And when they all saw what Ahaz had done to the synagogues and houses of study, everyone began saying ‘Woe!’ “And it was in the days of Ahaz”

ירמיה א, ג: וַיְהִי בַיּוֹמֵי יְהוֹיָקִים בֶּן יֹאשִׁיָּהוּ, מִה צָרָה הָיְתָה שָׁם יִרְמִיָּה ד, כג: רָאִיתִי אֶת הָאָרֶץ וְהִנֵּה תָהוּ וְנָהוּ וְגו', לְמֶלֶךְ שֶׁשָּׁלַח כְּתָבִים מִמְּדִינָה לְמְדִינָה וּבְכָל מְדִינָה וּמְדִינָה שֶׁהָיוּ מְגִיעִים כְּתָבָיו שֶׁל מֶלֶךְ הָיוּ מְחַבְּקִים וּמְנַשְׁקִים אוֹתָם עוֹמְדִים עַל רַגְלֵיהֶם וּפּוֹרְעִים רַאשֵׁיהֶם וְקוֹרִין אוֹתָם בִּירָאָה בְּאִימָה בְּרִתָּת וּבְזִיעַ, וְכִיּוֹן שֶׁהִגִּיעוּ לְמְדִינָתוֹ שֶׁל מֶלֶךְ קָרְאוּ וּקְרָעוּ וּשְׂרָפוּם. הַדָּא הוּא דְכְּתִיב יִרְמִיָּה לו, כג: וַיְהִי כִּקְרֹא יְהוּדֵי שְׁלֹשׁ דְּלָתוֹת וְאַרְבַּעַה וְגו', כְּתִלְתָּא אוֹ כְּאַרְבַּעַה פְּסוּקִים, וְכִיּוֹן שֶׁהִגִּיעוּ לְפָסוּק הַחֲמִישִׁי הָיוּ צָרִיָּה לְרֹאשׁ, מִיָּד יִרְמִיָּה לו, כג: יִקְרָעָה בְּתַעַר הַסֵּפֶר וְהִשְׁלָךְ אֶל הָאֵשׁ אֲשֶׁר אֶל הָאֵחַ וְגו', וְכִיּוֹן שֶׁרָאוּ הַכֹּל כִּף הַתְּחִילוּ צוֹחִין וַי, וַיְהִי בַיּוֹמֵי יְהוֹיָקִים. **וַיְהִי בַיּוֹמֵי אַחְשֻׁרוֹשׁ**, מִה צָרָה הָיְתָה שָׁם, לְהַשְׁמִיד לְהַרְג וּלְאַבֵּד. לְמֶלֶךְ שֶׁנִּכְנַס בְּכֶרֶם וְנִדְדוּגוּ לוֹ שֶׁלֶשָׁה שׁוֹנְאִים, הָרָאשׁוֹן הַתְּחִיל מְקַטֵּף בְּעוֹלָלוֹת, הַשֵּׁנִי הַתְּחִיל מִזְנֵב בְּאַשְׁפּוֹלוֹת, וְהַשְּׁלִישִׁי הַתְּחִיל עוֹקֵר בְּגִפְנִים. כִּף פְּרָעָה הִרְשָׁע הַתְּחִיל מְקַטֵּף בְּעוֹלָלוֹת, הַדָּא הוּא דְכְּתִיב **שְׁמוֹת א, כב:** וַיִּצֹו פְּרָעָה לְכָל עַמּוֹ לֵאמֹר כָּל הַבֵּן הַיְלִיד הַיָּאֲרָה תִּשְׁלִיכֶהוּ. נְבוּכַדְנֶצַּר שָׁחִיק עֲצָמוֹת הַתְּחִיל מִזְנֵב בְּאַשְׁפּוֹלוֹת, הַדָּא הוּא דְכְּתִיב **מַלְכִים ב כד, טז:** וְהַחֲרַשׁ וְהַמְסַגֵּר אֶלְף. רַבִּי בְּרַכְיָה בְּשֵׁם רַבִּי יְהוּדָה הַחֲרַשׁ אֶלְף וְהַמְסַגֵּר אֶלְף. וְרַבְּנָן אֲמַרִי הַחֲרַשׁ וְהַמְסַגֵּר אֶלְף. רַבִּי יוֹדָא בְּרַבִּי סִימוֹן אָמַר אֱלוֹ תַלְמִידֵי חֻכְמִים. וְרַבִּי שְׁמוּאֵל בַּר רַבִּי יִצְחָק אָמַר אֱלוֹ הַבְּלִיּוֹטִין. הַמֵּן הִרְשָׁע שָׁחִיק מְחִיק הַתְּחִיל עוֹקֵר בְּגִפְנִים, הַדָּא הוּא דְכְּתִיב: לְהַשְׁמִיד לְהַרְג וּלְאַבֵּד, בִּקְשׁ לְקַעֲקַע בִּיצְתָן שֶׁל יִשְׂרָאֵל, בְּעַד דִּיזְבוּן בְּכָל בֵּיתָא, וְכִיּוֹן שֶׁרָאוּ הַכֹּל כֵּן, הַתְּחִילוּ צוֹחִין וַי, **וַיְהִי בַיּוֹמֵי אַחְשֻׁרוֹשׁ.**

Jer 4:22-23 – “For my people are stupid, they do not know me, they are foolish children and they are not intelligent. They are clever at doing wrong, but unable to do right. I saw the earth and behold! Empty and void. And to the skies, and their was no light”

Jer 36:23 – “And it was as Yehudi read three or four columns, the king would cut it up with a scribe’s knife and throw it into the fire in the brazier, until the entire scroll was consumed by the fire in the brazier”
– Baruch delivers a scroll from Jeremiah to the king on a fast day. The king reads it and immediately destroys it, not liking its contents. The rabbis attribute this scroll to the book of Lamentations

Lam 1:5 – “Her enemies are now the leaders, her foes are at ease, because the Lord has afflicted her for her many transgressions. Her infants have gone into captivity before the enemy”⁴⁶

Est 3:13 – “And letters were sent by couriers to all the king’s provinces to destroy, to slaughter, and to lay waste to all the Jews, young and old, children and women, on a single day, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, that is the month of Adar, and to plunder their possessions”

a king who sent letters – God sent Lamentations with Jeremiah, but it was not heeded by Jehoiakim

Achashverosh – The fifth and final piece of evidence for Rabbi Samuel bar Nachman’s argument about the phrase “and it was in the days,” featuring the petichta’s protagonist Achashverosh

a king that enters a vineyard – Each individual grape is a member of the nation of Israel, the king is God, and the plunderers those who would harm Jews

small bunches – The helpless children killed by Pharaoh

hard to reach – The skilled laborers of the Jews, deported to Babylon after the exile

learned of the wise, counselors – Traditions imagining that the craftsmen and locksmiths were actually rabbis and administrators

uprooting the vine – Haman sought to destroy all of Israel

“And it was in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah” (Jer 1:3) What distress was there? “I saw the earth and behold! Empty and void...” (Jer 4:23)

This is like a king who sent letters from province to province, and in every other province that the letters of the king arrived, the people would embrace and kiss them, standing upon their feet and uncovering their heads, and they read in fear, in awe, trembling and agitated. But when the letters reached the province of the king, the people read them, and tore them, and burned them, as it is written: “And it was as Yehudi read three or four leaves” (Jer 36:23) meaning three or four verses of Lamentations, and when he reached the fifth verse: “her enemies are now the leaders” (Lam 1:5) forthwith “he cut it with the penknife and he threw it to the fire on the hearth” (Jer 36:23)

And when they all saw thus, everyone began crying ‘Woe!’ “And it was in the days of Jehoiakim” (Jer 1:3)

“**And it was in the days of Achashverosh**” (Est 1:1) What distress was there? “To destroy, to slaughter, and to lay waste” (Est 3:13)

This is like a king that enters a vineyard, and three enemies came to plunder it:

The first started plucking the small bunches of grapes

The second started to cut off the hard to reach clusters of grapes

And the third started uprooting the vine

Thus, Pharaoh the wicked started plucking the small bunches of grapes, as it is written: “And Pharaoh commanded all his people, saying: Every son that is born you will throw him into the river” (Ex 1:22)

Nebuchadnezzar, may his bones be crushed! started to cut off the hard to reach cluster of grapes, as it is written: “And the craftsmen and the locksmiths are a thousand” (2 Kings 24:16)

Rabbi Berekiah said in the name of Rabbi Judah: The craftsmen were a thousand and the locksmiths were a thousand

And the rabbis said: The craftsmen and the locksmiths were a thousand

Rabbi Judah bar Rabbi Simon said: These are the students of the wise

And Rabbi Samuel bar Rabbi Yitzchak said: These are the counsellors

Haman the wicked, may he surely be crushed! started uprooting the vines, as it is written: “to destroy, to slaughter, and to lay waste” (Est 3:13)

He sought to stamp out the foundation of Israel, searching to be rid of the house. And when they all saw thus, everyone began to cry ‘Woe!’ **And it was in the days of Achashverosh**

This sermon, descended from Babylon, shows the traditional origins of our midrash. The petichta has been devoted thus far to answering the question of what occurred in the days of Achashverosh. The presumption is that nothing good happened, and this is the case whenever the words “and it was in the days” appear. Rabbi Samuel bar Nachman shows us five scenarios where this is the case and gives a parable for each. The form of the parable is consistent: there is a king, representing God, and a number of subordinates representing the Jewish people in different ways. The first parable is of a king who used to visit a town in his country but was attacked and never returned there again. God’s presence on earth was for the sake of Abraham, whom God loved. When Abraham went to war with Amraphel, the very presence of God on earth was at stake. The second parable comes from the days of Judges, where the residents of a province rise up against the king’s tax collector. This midrash, already so critical of imperial authority, supports the king and his right to taxation. God is owed a moral tax by the Israelites, based on the contract signed in Deuteronomy, and exacts punishment when the payment is not delivered. The third and fourth parables are tales of betrayal. The tutor of a king’s child, representing the human ruler over the Jews, wishes not for the child to survive. The functions necessary for the survival of the relationship between God and the Jews at this time is the study of Torah and the practice of prayer. Without these, God’s presence could not be felt on earth. The king sends out letters to all his provinces where he is loved, but in his capital city, the people burn them. So again, the ruler of the Jews disregards the words hand delivered to him from the mouth of a prophet. Finally, in the fifth parable, we see how a king lovingly cultivates his vineyard, only to have it plundered by thieves. The nation of Israel is conceived in this tradition as subjects of God, like the relationship of a king to his people, but also as the grapes on the vine of the Lord, providing God sustenance and pleasure. Those who would kill a member of the nation of Israel would steal from God’s possessions. God values the lives of a Jew more than most kings value the lives of their subjects, particularly Achashverosh, who would allow an extermination of a whole population in his realm.

8.3 Rabbi Berekiah's Proem: Correspondence between Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman and His Students

שמעון בר אבא בשם רבי יונתן אמר כל מקום שנאמר ויהי, משמש צרה ושמחה, אם צרה אין צרה כיוצא בה, אם שמחה אין שמחה כיוצא בה. אתא רבי שמואל בר נחמן ועבדה פלגו, כל מקום שנאמר ויהי משמש צרה, וכל מקום שנאמר ויהי, שמחה. אתיבון והא כתיב ויאמר אלהים יהי אור ויהי אור. אמר לון אף היא אינה שמחה, שלא זכה העולם להשתמש לאורה אורה אמר רבי יודא ברבי סימון, אורה שנבראת ביום הראשון היה אדם צופה ומביט בה מסוף העולם ועד סופו, וכיון שצפה הקדוש ברוך הוא בדור אנוש ובדור המבול ובדור הפלגה שהן עתידין לחטוא לפניהן, עמד וגנזה מהם, הדא הוא דכתיב (איוב לח, טו): וימנע מרשעים אורם, והיכן גנזה, בגן עדן, הדא הוא דכתיב (תהלים צז, יא): (אור זרע לצדיק ולישרי לב שמחה.

Job 38:12-15 – “Have you ever commanded the day to break? Assigned the dawn its place, so that it seizes the corners of the earth and shakes the wicked out of it? It changes like clay under the seal till its hues are fixed like those of a garment. And he withdrew their light from the wicked, and the upraised arm will be broken”

Ps 97:10-11 – “Lovers of the Lord, hate evil! He guards the lives of His loyal ones, shielding them from the hand of the wicked”

and it was – the past tense indicates distress

and it will be – the future tense is positive

his students – The students of Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman challenge him to explain Gen 1:3 as a matter of distress

there was – Translated literally to “and it was”

reserved the light – Originally you could see from one end of the earth to the other, but God took the light away due to the wickedness of the generation of the Flood

Simon bar Abba in the name of Rabbi Yonatan said: Any place that Torah says “and it was” treats distress and happiness like the one going out in it

If distress, there is no distress like the one going out

If happiness, there is no happiness like the one going out

Now Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman and his students were arguing over whether all the places that it says “and it was” ministers distress, and all the places that it says “and it will be” are happiness

His students said: And *ha*, it is written: “And God said: Let there be light. And there was light.” (Gen 1:3)

He replied: This is also not happiness, because the world had not been acquitted to be ministered to his light

Rabbi Judah bar Rabbi Simon said: The light on the first day shone so that man could look on the world from one end to the other, and when the Holy One, blessed is He, conspired on the generation of Enoch, the generation of the flood, and on the generation of the separation that was destined to sin before Him, He stood, and He reserved the light from them, as it is written: “and he withdrew from the wicked their light” (Job 38:15)

And where did he reserve it? In the garden of Eden, as it is written: “Light is sown for the righteous, and stands the hearts of the happy” (Ps 97:11)

אֲתִיבוֹן וַיְהִי עֶרֶב וַיְהִי בֹקֶר יוֹם אֶחָד, אָמַר לוֹן אִפְּ הִדָּא אֵינָה שְׂמִחָה, שְׂכַל מַה שְׁנִבְרָא בְּיוֹם הַרְאִשׁוֹן הֵן עֲתִידִין לְהַבְלוֹת, הִדָּא הוּא דְכָתִיב יִשְׁעִיה נָא, ו: כִּי שְׂמִימִים כְּעֶשֶׂן נִמְלָחוּ וְהָאֶרֶץ כְּבָגָד תִּבְלָה. אֲתִיבוֹן וְהַכְּתִיב יוֹם שְׁנִי, יוֹם שְׁלִישִׁי, עַד יוֹם הַשְּׁשִׁי, אָמַר לוֹן אִפְּ הִדָּא אֵינָה שְׂמִחָה, שְׂכַל מַה שְׁנִבְרָא בְּשִׁשִּׁת יְמֵי בְּרִאשִׁית צְרִיכִין עֲשִׂיָּה, שְׂאִינִן נַעֲשִׂין עֲשִׂיָּה שְׁלֵמָה, כְּגוֹן הַחֲטִיִּים צְרִיכִים לְהַטְחוֹן, וְהַחֲרָדֵל וְהַתְּרַמּוֹסִין צְרִיכִין לְהַמְתֵּק. אֲתִיבוֹן בְּרִאשִׁית לֹט, ב: וַיְהִי ה' אֶת יוֹסֵף, אָמַר לוֹן אִפְּ הִדָּא אֵינָה שְׂמִחָה, שְׂמִתּוֹךְ כֶּךָ נִתְגַּרְתָּה אוֹתָהּ הַדָּב. אֲתִיבוֹן וִיקְרָא ט, א: וַיְהִי בְּיוֹם הַשְּׂמִינִי קָרָא מִשָּׁה לְאַהֲרֹן וּלְבָנָיו, אָמַר לוֹן אִפְּ הִדָּא אֵינִי טוֹב, שְׂבָאוֹתוֹ הַיּוֹם מִתּוֹ נָדָב וְאַבְיָהוּא וּבְכוּ לְהֵם כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל, שְׂנֵאָמַר וִיקְרָא י, ו: וְאַחֲיֵכֶם כָּל בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל יִבְכוּ אֶת הַשְּׂרָפָה. אֲתִיבוֹן בְּמַדְבַּר ז, א: וַיְהִי בְּיוֹם כָּלוֹת מִשָּׁה לְהַקִּים אֶת הַמִּשְׁכָּן, אָמַר לוֹן אִפְּ הִדָּא אֵינָה שְׂמִחָה, שְׂנִגְזָד בּוֹ בְּנִינוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם אֲתִיבוֹן יְהוֹשֻׁעַ ז, א: וַיְהִי ה' אֶת יְהוֹשֻׁעַ, אָמַר לוֹן אֵינָה שְׂמִחָה שְׂבּוֹ בְּיוֹם נִהְרַג יְאִיר שְׂהָיָה שְׂקוּל כְּרֶבֶה שֶׁל סִנְהֶדְרִין, הִדָּא הוּא דְכָתִיב יְהוֹשֻׁעַ ז, ה: וַיָּכּוּ מֵהֵם אֲנָשֵׁי הָעִיר כְּשִׁלְשִׁים וְשָׁשָׁה אִישׁ, שְׁלִשִׁים וְשָׁשָׁה אֲנָשִׁים אֵין כְּתִיב כָּאֵן אֶלָּא כְּשִׁלְשִׁים וְשָׁשָׁה אִישׁ זֶה יְאִיר שְׂשִׁקוּל כְּרֶבֶה שֶׁל סִנְהֶדְרִין, מַה כְּתִיב שָׁם וַיִּקְרַע יְהוֹשֻׁעַ שְׂמִלוֹתָיו. אֲתִיבוֹן שְׂמוּאֵל א יח, יד: וַיְהִי דוֹד בְּכָל דְּרָכּוֹ מִשְׁכִּיל, אָמַר לוֹן אֵינָה שְׂמִחָה, שְׂמִתּוֹךְ כֶּךָ כְּתִיב שְׂמוּאֵל א יח, ט: וַיְהִי שְׂאוּל עוֹנֵן אֶת דּוֹד. אֲתִיבוֹן דְּבָרֵי הַיָּמִים א יז, א: וַיְהִי כְּאֲשֶׁר יָשָׁב דּוֹד בְּבֵיתוֹ, אָמַר לוֹן אֵינָה שְׂמִחָה, שְׂבָאוֹתוֹ הַיּוֹם בָּא נִתָּן הַנְּבִיא וְאָמַר לוֹ דְּבָרֵי הַיָּמִים א יז, א: לֹא אֶתָּה תִּבְנֶה לִי הַבַּיִת.

Gen 1:5,8,13,etc – The term “and it was” is used separately for every day of creation except Shabbat

Gen 39:2 – The term “and it was” used to show how God was with Joseph as he rose through the ranks of slaves in Potiphar’s house

Lev 9:1 – Aaron is called as priest to make sacrifice

Num 7:1 – Moses finishes establishing the Tabernacle, certainly a day to celebrate?

Josh 6:27 – “And it was” used to refer to the victories handed to Joshua by the Lord

1 Sam 18:14 – David’s prestige as a general and artist was unmatched

1 Chron 17:1 – David resided in a palace nicer than what the Tabernacle was house in

on the first day – Even when the world was created, it was not necessarily happy, because it is ultimately going to be destroyed
second, third, sixth day – All that was created on the earth was destroyed by the flood

she-bear – Meaning Potiphar’s wife⁴⁷

deaths of Nadib and Abihu – The sons of Aaron were killed for bringing “strange fire” in front of the altar

builder of the world – The Tabernacle hid the tangible presence of God away from the world

Sanhedrin – Political body consisting of 70 members

from the midst of this – While David began to prosper, Saul became jealous and murderous

Nathan the prophet – David was denied the chance to build the Temple

The students corresponded: “And there was evening and there was morning” (Gen 1:5)

Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman replied: Also, on the first day there is not happiness, because all He created on the first day was destined to perish, as it is written: “Because the heavens will dissipate like smoke, and the land will wear out like clothes” (Isa 51:6)

They responded: And this is written on the second day, the third day, until the sixth day

He said: Also then there was not happiness, because all that was created on the sixth day needed to be made further, for there is not anything that was made complete, as wheat needs to be ground and mustard needs to be sweetened

They responded: “And the Lord was with Joseph” (Gen 39:2)

He said: Also then there was not happiness, that from the midst of this he let loose the she-bear [Potiphar]

They responded: “And it was on the eighth day Moses called out to Aaron and to his sons” (Lev 9:1)

He said: Also then there was not good, because with that day came the deaths of Nadib and Abihu. And all Israel lamented for them, as it says: “And your brothers, all the house of Israel, will lament the burning” (Lev 10:6)

They responded: “And it was on that day Moses finished establishing the Tabernacle” (Num 7:1)

He said: Also then there was not happiness, because the structure of the world was hidden away in it

They responded: “And the Lord was with Joshua” (Josh 6:27)

He said: Also then there was not happiness, because on that day Jair, who was weighed the same as the the greater part of the Sanhedrin, was slain, as it is written: “And the men of Ai smote them as 36 men.” (Josh 7:5) Jair is as 36 men, weighed as the greater part of the Sanhedrin. What is written there? “And Joshua rent his clothes” (Josh 7:6)

They responded: “And David was prudent in all his ways” (1 Sam 18:14)

He said: There was not happiness, for from the midst of this it is written: “And Saul eyed David” (1 Sam 18:9)

They responded: “And it was when David resided in his house” (1 Chron 17:1)

He said: There was not happiness, since on that day Nathan the prophet came and said to him: “You will not build me a house” (1 Chron 17:4)

אמרין ליה אמרינן דילן, אמר את דילה, אמר להם כתיב יואל ד, יח: וקהיה ביזום ההוא יטפו הקרים
 עסיס זכריה יד, ח: וקהיה ביזום ההוא יצאו מים חיים מירושלים. ישעיה ז, כא: וקהיה ביזום ההוא
 יחיה איש עגלת בקר ושתי צאן. מיכה ה, ז: וקהיה שארית יעקב בגוים. ישעיה כז, יג: וקהיה ביזום
 ההוא יתקע בשופר גדול. תהלים א, ג: וקהיה כעץ שתול על פלגי מים. אתיבון ליה ירמיה לח,
 כח: וקהיה כאשר נלכדה ירושלים. אמר לון אף ההיא אינה צרה אלא שמחה, שבו ביזום נולד מנחם
 ונטלו ישראל אפוכי על עונותיהן, דאמר רבי שמואל אפוכי גדולה נטלו ישראל על עונותיהן בשעה
 שחרב בית המקדש, הדא הוא דכתיב איכה ד, כב: תם עונך בת ציון.⁴⁸

Joel 4:18 – “And it will be on that day the mountains will drop fresh wine, and the hills will flow with milk, and the reserves of Judah shall flow with water, a spring shall issue from the house of the Lord and will water the Wadi of the Acacias”

Zech 14:8 – “And it will be on that day the living waters go out from Jerusalem, half to the Eastern sea and half to the Western sea, throughout the summer and winter”

Isa 7:21 – Isaiah prophesizes how the Lord will cut away Samaria from the covenant

Mic 5:7 – “And the remnant of Jacob will be among the nations, in the midst of the midst of many peoples, like a lion among beasts of the wild, like a fierce lion among flocks of sheep, which tramples wherever it goes and rends, with none to deliver”

Isa 27:13 – “And it will be on that day the great shofar will be blown, and the enslaved in the land of Assyria and the expelled in the land of Egypt will come and worship the Lord on the holy mountain in Jerusalem”

Ps 1:3 – “And he will be as a tree planted upon the rivers of the water, which yields its fruit in season, whose foliage never fades, and whatever it produces thrives

Lam 4:22 – “The punishment of your iniquities are completed, daughter of Zion, He will not continue to exile you. Your iniquity, daughter of Edom, He will mark. He will uncover your sins”

now say yours – The students of Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman tried to challenge his theory that “and it was” always marked a time of distress. Now, they ask their rabbi what evidence he has that “and it will be” designates happiness⁴⁹
the comforter was born, a great settlement for their iniquities – Upon the destruction of the Temple, the Messiah was promised to come to liberate the Jews at the end of days⁵⁰

The students said to Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman: We have said our texts, now you say yours.

He said to them: It is written:

“And it will be on that day the mountains will drop fresh wine” (Joel 4:18)

“And it will be on that day the living waters go out from Jerusalem” (Zech 14:8)

“And it will be on that day that a man will save the life of a young calf and two sheep” (Isa 7:21)

“And the remnant of Jacob will be among the nations” (Mic 5:7)

“And it will be on that day the great shofar will be blown” (Isa 27:13)

“And he will be as a tree planted upon the rivers of the water” (Ps 1:3)

The students responded to him: “And it was when Jerusalem was seized” (Jer 38:28)

He said: Also there was not distress, but rather happiness, for on that day the comforter was born, and Israel received a settlement for its iniquities

As Rabbi Shmuel said: Israel received a great settlement for their iniquities in the hour that the Temple was destroyed, as it is written: “The punishment of your iniquities are completed, daughter of Zion” (Lam 4:22)

The exchange between Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman and his students tries to hold in suspension the dialectic of rabbinic theology. The midrash allows for creative uses of Scripture outside of their literary context. Verses are taken and recontextualized into an organic structure of symbolism where any Biblical verse can be held against any other. In this way, almost any incident in the Torah can be interpreted as distressing or happy. Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman takes verses that would appear to be happy, but it will be rendered meaningless by the fatal divine plan. Similarly, all that is truly happy in the world is anything that contains the expectation of the ultimate triumph of the nation of Israel over their enemies, and the final descending of the Messiah down to earth. Here is our answer to theological paradox of the cycle of empire in which the Jews are stuck: there will be an apocalyptic event that ends the cycle. The material conditions of this event, however, are not well known.

8.4 Rabbi Berekiah's Proem: Conclusion of the Petichta

רב ושמואל, רב אמר כל מה שאמר הקדוש ברוך הוא, בו אמר, הֲדָא הוּא דְכָתִיב יִשְׁעִיהּ יָד, כַּב :
וְהִכְרַתִּי לְבַבְלָא שְׁמֵי וְיִשְׂרָאֵל וְיִנּוּן וְנִכְדָּא, שְׁמֵי זֶה נְבוּכַדְנֶצַּר, וְיִשְׂרָאֵל זֶה אֲוִיל מְרוּדָה, וְיִנּוּן זֶה בִּלְשַׁצַּר, וְנִכְדָּא
זוּהִי וְשִׁתִּי. דְּבַר אַחַר, שְׁמֵי זֶה הִכְתַּב שְׁלֵהוֹן, וְיִשְׂרָאֵל זֶה לְשׁוֹן, וְיִנּוּן וְנִכְדָּא בַר וּבַר בַּר. וְשְׁמוּאֵל אָמַר כָּל
מֵה שְׁאֵמֵר הַקְּדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא, בּוֹ אָמַר, הֲדָא הוּא דְכָתִיב יִרְמִיָּה מַט, לַח : וְשִׁמְתִּי כְסָאֵי בְּעֵילָם
וְהֶאֱבַדְתִּי מִשְׁמֵי מְלָךְ וְיִשְׂרָאֵל, מְלָךְ זֶה וְשִׁתִּי, וְיִשְׂרָאֵל אֵלּוּ שְׁבַעֵת שְׂרֵי פָרַס וּמְדִי. רַבִּי שְׁמוּאֵל בַּר
נַחֲמָנִי אָמַר דְּבָרִים כַּח, לוֹ : יוֹלָךְ ה' אֶתְךָ וְאֶת מְלָכְךָ, אִם תֵּאמַר לְבַבְלָא, וְהִלָּא מְבַבְלָא הִי, אִם כֵּן
לְמָה נֶאֱמַר: אֵל גּוֹי אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִדְעַת אֶתְהָ וְאֶבְתִּיךָ, אֵלָא זֶה מְדִי, הֲוִי וְיֵהִי בִימֵי.⁵¹

Isa 14:22 – “I will rise up against them, declares the Lord of Hosts, and I will cut off to Babylon name and remnant, and offspring and progeny, declares the Lord”

Jer 49:38-39 – “And I will put my throne in Elam, and I will cause to perish there the kings and princes. But in the days to come I will return the fortunes of Elam, declares the Lord”

Deut 28:36 – “The Lord will move you with your king that you will set upon you to a nation that did not know you or your fathers, and you will serve there other gods of wood and stone”

he said about it – everything that the Lord said, He said about the days of Achashverosh
Nebuchadnezzar, Evil-Merodach, Belshazzar, Vashti – The line of Babylonian kings who rule over the Jews in exile. According to the midrash, Vashti is the granddaughter of Nebuchadnezzar
their writing – The writing of the Babylonians was replaced by Persian
their tongue – Aramaic became the language of the land after the rise of Cyrus
a son and grandson – Referring to Evil-Merodach and Belshazzar, successors of Nebuchadnezzar
Vashti, seven princes of Persia and Media – Vashti was killed for transgressing Achashverosh, per the advice of the seven princes
rather this is Media – Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman argues that it was not Babylon who fulfilled the curses of Deuteronomy 28, but rather Media, especially under Achashverosh

Rav and Samuel were talking:

Rav said: All that the Holy One, blessed is He, said, He said about it, as it is written: “And I will cut off to Babylon name and remnant, and offspring and progeny” (Isa 14:22)

“Name” – This is Nebuchadnezzar

“And remnant” – This is Ehvil-Merodach

“And offspring” – This is Belshazzar

“And progeny” – This is Vashti

Another thing:

“Name” – This is their writing

“And remnant” – This is their tongue

“And offspring and progeny” – A son and grandson

And Samuel said: All that the Holy One, blessed is He, said, He said about it, as it is written: “And I will put my throne in Elam, and I will cause to perish there the kings and princes” (Jer 49:38)

“King” – This is Vashti

“And princes” – These are the seven princes of Persia and Media

Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman said: “The Lord will move you and your king” (Deut 28:36)

If you will say this is Babylon, they were not from Babylon.

Thus, it is said: “To a nation neither you nor your fathers know” (Deut 28:36)

Rather, this is Media: **And it was in the days...**

The conclusion of the petichta shows how *R* has been interpreting Scripture up until this point: every verse relates, in one way or another to the days of Achashverosh. The best descriptor of the days of Achashverosh, however, are the curses of Deut. 28, which occur when the Israelites fail to observe the covenant. These curses are evidenced throughout Scripture and Jewish literature, but they apply particularly to this moment. Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman leaves us with a final thesis: it was not under the rule of Babylon that the curses of Deut. 28 were fulfilled, but under Media. Never before had the Jews faced the possibility of absolute annihilation. God had punished them for their iniquities but had never fully pulled favor from Israel to preclude utter destruction. Thus, the man-made genocidal machinations of Haman in the days of Achashverosh are the ultimate punishment. The repeated sinful actions of the Jews mean that God keeps raising over them impious rulers, and the impious rulers on their own impetus keep outdoing themselves with their cruelty and inclinations toward mass slaughter.

Notes to the Commentary

1. V. b. Menachot 103b
2. A small dealer or retailer (הַפְּלֵטָה) cf. Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (New York: Judaica Press, 1996), 976.
3. From the Greek *paltair* (הַפְּלֵטָה) a shopkeeper, esp. a seller of baker's wares cf. Jastrow 1180.
4. Name of a prison in Caesarea during the Roman occupation (בְּדִיּוּטִי, some ed. דִּיטִי) cf. Jastrow 298.
5. See Num. Rabbah 9:47 on the relationship between the covenant and its accompanying curses throughout Torah. See also Melissa Ramos "A Northwest Semitic Curse Formula: The Sefire Treaty and Deuteronomy 28" *Zeitschrift Fur Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 128, no. 2 (2016): 205-20.
6. See David Stern, *Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies* (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 55-71 and Joseph Heinemann, "Profile of a Midrash: The Art of Composition in Leviticus Rabba," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39 (1971), 141-150 for an introduction to the form of the proem, and its role in homiletics in the synagogue.
7. Cf. Maurice Freedman, *Midrash Rabbah: Esther Rabbah* (London: Soncino Press 1939), 1.
8. *ibid.*
9. *ibid.*
10. V. Sotah 49a:7. Rav cites Deut 28:67 not as referring to the Four Kingdoms but to the days without the Temple: אמר רבא בכל יום ויום מרובה קללתו משל חבירו.
11. The Rabbinic term for Greece (יֵוֹן) particularly refers to the Greek Seleucid empire, from the word Ionia cf. Jastrow 569. Used in modern Hebrew as well.
12. For more on the Four Kingdoms as a schema for world history see: Brennan Breed, "Daniel's Four Kingdoms Schema: A History of Re-Writing World History." *Interpretation* 71 (2017), 178-89.
13. V. Lam Rabbah 1:45, 4:22 and Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael 14:13:2 which continues to show not just when but how exactly the Israelites were punished in each instance of return to Egypt.
14. See André Key, "If Thou Do Not Hearken unto the Voice of the Lord Thy God: A Critique of Theodicy in Black Judaism." *Black Theology* 12 (2014), 267-88 for a usage of Deut. 28:68 in modern Hebrew Israelite theology. How does it compare to the rabbis usage here?
15. In ships (בְּאֶגְיוֹת), in poverty (בְּעִנְיֹת).
16. In the collection *Midrash Rabbah*, Trajan only appears by name in our current passage, Lam. Rabbah, and Eccl. Rabbah. See Eccl. Rabbah 3:16 for Trajan comparing himself to Nebuchadnezzar. He is referred to in an anti-revolutionary tradition in S.S. Rabbah 2:7:1 Cf. Maurice Freedman, *Midrash Rabbah: Index* (London: Soncino Press 1939), 128.
17. The Talmud says that in times of danger, it is still considered a mitzvah to light the Hannukah candles indoors so no one will see, cf Shabbat 21b:

תנו רבנן נר חנוכה מצוה להניחה על פתח ביתו מבחוץ אם היה דר בעלייה מניחה בחלון
הסמוכה לרשות הרבים ובשעת הסכנה מניחה על שלחנו ודיו

18. See William Horbury, *Jewish War under Trajan and Hadrian* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014), 235-246, John Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE-117 CE)*. Hellenistic Culture and Society, 33 (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996), 78-81.
19. Also spelled “rabbinization.”
20. From Greek *patron* (פטרונות) cf. Jastrow 1158.
21. From Greek *tamiaca*, lit. belonging to the imperial treasury (טמיקא) cf. Jastrow 539.
22. Location uncertain.
23. See Adrian Schenker, “The Biblical Legislation on the Release of Slaves: The Road from Exodus to Leviticus.” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 23 (1998), 23-41.
24. V. b. Megillah 11a, from the Babylonian Esther Midrash, and parallels in Sifra 8:10. Lerner says that this sermon is pulled directly from a Babylonian source, as it does not end with the standard “And it was in the days of Achashverosh.” See Lerner, Myron Bialik. “The Works of Aggadic Midrash and the Esther Midrashim,” in Shmuel Safrai, Zeev Safrai, Joshua Schwartz, and Peter J. Tomson (eds.), *The Literature of the Sages, Second Part: Midrash and Targum, Liturgy, Poetry, Mysticism, Contracts, Inscriptions, Ancient Science, and the Languages of Rabbinic Literature* (Assen and Minneapolis: Van Gorcum and Fortress, 2006), 178.
25. Vespasian features prominently in Lam. Rabbah. He is responsible for sending prominent men and women of Jerusalem on ships to the brothels of Rome. They threw themselves overboard rather than experience their fate. See a treatment of this narrative in: Julia Watts Belser, “Sex in the Shadow of Rome: Sexual Violence and Theological Lament in Talmudic Disaster Tales.” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, vol. 30, no. 1 (2014), 5-24.
26. See the recent Islamophobic literature on the difference between Gog and Magog in Christian and Islamic reception: Nicholas Railton, “Gog and Magog: The History of a Symbol.” *The Evangelical Quarterly* 75, no.1 (2003), 23-43.
27. V. Lev Rabbah 13:5.
28. According to Rabbi Freedman footnotes, R. Yochanan thinks the Hebrew *dov* in Dan 7:5 is actually *zov* meaning wolf, like in Jer 5:6.
29. Shimshi appears elsewhere in rabbinic literature, see b. Megillah 15.
30. Greek referencing a gold and silver tax levied by Constantine (פרוגיון) cf. Jastrow 1217
31. Greek *angaria* (אנגריא), cf. Jastrow 81.
32. Greek *teatra* (טיאטראות) .
33. Greek *karksa* (קרקסאות).
34. On Psalm 18 among the other Davidic apocalyptic Psalms see Bernard Gosse, “Le Réaffirmation Messianique Du Ps 18 Dans La Perspective Du Salut Marginal Au Retour de l’exil.” *Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 130, no. 4 (2018), 586-601.

35. Saul seems to be the butt of a number of literary jokes throughout time, see: Siam Bhayro, "The Madness of King Saul." *Archiv Für Orientforschung* 50 (2003), 285-92.
36. V. S.S Rabbah 5:5, Eccl Rabbah 10:13, and b. Megillah 12a. God complains to the Messiah that Cyrus only gave permission to return to Jerusalem, as opposed to gathering in all the exiles. Helps our reading of R. Hanina b. Ada's tradition of Cyrus.
37. V. S.S Rabbah 5:5.
38. V. Deut Rabbah 5:9, Yalkut Shimoni on Nach 920:10. Est. Rabbah actually only includes 4 sayings of Rabban Gamaliel, the fifth is included here: "When a younger says to an elder, "I am better than you," the years of people are shortened."
39. Aramaic (אֲרַמַיָּא עַלְמָא), alt. speaker of the world.
40. Lit. *barbarian* (בְּרַבְרִין).
41. Interesting article on the literary placement of Genesis 14: Volker Glissmann, "Genesis 14: A Diaspora Novella?" *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 34, no. 1 (2009), 33-45.
42. Hadrian suppressed the bloody Bar Kokhba revolt, depopulating the province of Palestine: Menahem Mor, *The Second Jewish Revolt: The Bar Kokhba War, 132-136 CE*. The Brill Reference Library of Judaism, Volume 50 (Leiden: Brill, 2016).
43. Greek *pedagog* (לְפִדְגוֹג) cf. Jastrow 1136.
44. See m. Pirkei Avot 3:2, 6.
45. Synagogues appeared in the first century Palestine but did not gain real prominence until the Christianization of the fourth and fifth centuries CE. See: Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society, 200 B.C.E. to 64-0 C.E.* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), 216.
46. For more on rabbinic thought on Lamentations see: Jason Kalman, "If Jeremiah Wrote it, it Must Be OK: On the Attribution of Lamentations to Jeremiah in Early Rabbinic Texts" *Acta Theologica* 29 (2009), 31-52.
47. For more on Potiphar's wife in the midrash see: Isaac Kalimi, "Joseph between Potiphar and His Wife: The Biblical Text in the Light of a Comparative Study on Early Jewish Exegesis." *Biblische Notizen* 107 (2001), 55-64.
48. V. Gen Rabbah 42:3, Petichta Ruth Rabbah 7 (the last tradition in the petichta), Lev Rabbah 11:7.
49. See Hirshman on authority in rabbinic pedagogy: Marc Hirshman, *The Stabilization of Rabbinic Culture, 100 CE-350 CE: Texts on Education and Their Late Antique Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 97-105.
50. Cf. b. Sanhedrin 98b.
51. V. b. Megillah 10b.

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