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Yashar Books is a new venture in Jewish scholarship. It was founded by Gil Student and Moshe Schapiro, two young Orthodox rabbis with a mission: to give Open Access to the world of Jewish inquiry.

This contribution to the Open Access Project is the Rabbi Gidon Rothstein's doctoral dissertation titled *Writing Midrash Avot*. Rabbi Rothstein analyzes commentaries to *Pirkei Avot* written in the fifteenth century and notes a distinct shift in approach – between *peshat* and *derash* methodologies – from earlier commentators.

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ABSTRACT OF: WRITING MIDRASH AVOT: THE CHANGE THAT THREE FIFTEENTH CENTURY EXEGETES INTRODUCED TO AVOT INTERPRETATION, ITS IMPACT AND ORIGINS

The dissertation identifies and analyzes a fifteenth century shift in the hermeneutics of the third century Mishnaic tractate, *Avot*, known in English as Ethics of the Fathers. Relying on the distinction between *peshat* and *derash* already articulated in studies of Midrash, the study shows that *Avot* commentators before the fifteenth century read the text in ways that could constitute a *peshat* reading (best translated as a contextually accurate plainsense rendering) of the text. In sharp contrast, the fifteenth century saw the rise of “reading in” to *Avot* the way that *Midrash* “read in” to the Biblical text, particularly in the writings of commentators such as Mattathias haYizhari, Joseph Hayyun, and Isaac Abarbanel.

The dissertation defines the difference between *peshat* and *derash*, demonstrates the new hermeneutics of the fifteenth century, shows that earlier commentators offered only *peshat* readings of the text, and that sixteenth century commentators continued the new trend. It then searches for factors that led to that change, noting especially the roughly contemporary and similar shift in Talmudic interpretation-studied at length by academic scholars such as Daniel Boyarin and H.Z. Dimitrovsky-- credited to R. Isaac Kanpanton. The conclusion notes that the two significant changes in modes of reading point to the fifteenth century as a time period worth further study, as the mother of a self-conscious search for innovation in Jewish exegesis and thought.

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Eleven years is a long time; thirty-eight years is even longer. In both journeys, the one to receive a doctorate and the other to live my life, I have accumulated debts at each step along the way. Readers will pardon me if I indulge my need to express some of that gratitude to those to whom I owe the most.

To begin at the beginning, my original nuclear family, including my mother and siblings, have been a constant presence and blessing in my life from the day I was born. As I have traveled to the completion of my formal education, they were there to advise, encourage, and help me succeed.

Teachers have always been central to my growth, but a few stand out from a very distinguished pack. Joel Wolowelsky began as a math teacher but has become so much more; he remains a source of wise counsel whenever I turn to him. R. Ezra Bick first showed me the intellectual fascination that could be found in study of Jewish texts; R. Aharon Lichtenstein set a standard of excellence to strive for, in knowledge, personal character, and depth of thought about a well-lived life.

Prof. Haym Soloveitchik showed me that Jewish History could be more than a series of facts, and guided me in my first steps as a historian. I remember all of my time spent under his tutelage with fondness and longing.

Jay Harris took on a doctoral student who was not his own, and shepherded me through some very tough times to completion. I owe him more than I can express.

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The Mishnah reports that when the High Priest would read the Torah on Yom Kippur, he would conclude by saying, "More than what I have read to you is written here." Numerous important people have been left out of this list, by force of necessity. Suffice it to say that I have been repeatedly and continuously blessed with the company of people who offered the kind of friendship and support that helped me grow as needed. I am grateful for all of them and to all of them, past and present, and only regret that I have not the space to specify them.

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canvas on which I paint my life, the base assumption to be adopted or changed. It is to the memories of these two men, each to the proper extent, that I dedicate this work.

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WRITING *MIDRASH AVOT*: THE CHANGE THAT THREE FIFTEENTH CENTURY EXEGETES INTRODUCED TO AVOT INTERPRETATION, ITS IMPACT AND ORIGINS

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IT MEANS TO READ MISHNAH AS BIBLE

Commentators work within limits, as do we all. Their limits as readers of an earlier text are set by the conventions of meaning of the society and culture they inhabit; what would be a daring interpretation for one commentator is commonplace for another.¹

This study demonstrates that three scholars in fifteenth century Spain changed the way the Mishnaic tractate Avot was read, by reading that text in ways that until then had only been used in study of the Bible.² Furthermore, they did so in a way that allowed them to produce readings of the text that are best construed as reading into the text rather than understanding it on its own terms. We can call such readings midrashic, since they parallel what Midrash did to the Bible. In that sense, these authors began writing a Midrash Avot.

Innovations in exegesis might not seem the stuff of exciting intellectual history, except that medieval and early modern Jewish thinkers thought of themselves as deriving their worldview from a close reading of classical texts. Loosening the rules of what those texts could be acceptably construed as meaning necessarily expands the range of ideas rabbinic readers could find in their reading of traditional texts.

Here, we will see that the changed hermeneutic incorporates two factors of importance for the intellectual history of the time generally. First, in applying Biblical modes of exegesis to Avot, a rabbinic text, these scholars blurred a previously distinct line between divinely revealed and

¹ My understanding of the interconnection between texts and their readers, and the importance of the implicit rules that govern that interaction was helped most significantly by reading S. Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge: Harv. Univ. Press, 1983). I was particularly struck by his notion of interpretive communities; this study fundamentally attempts to show that haYizhari, Hayyun, and Abarbanel were the earliest identifiable representatives of a new such community within Avot commentary, fruitfully applying techniques of exegesis in a context where they had not been used before.

² Admittedly, one can find occasional such readings within the Talmud itself. Professor Jay Harris pointed out *mKetubbot* 4:6, where the Mishnah itself refers to R. Elazar b. Azariah as offering a *derash*, which in its context probably means a reading that seems not to care about the actual intent of the earlier saying. Too, the Talmud often re-reads a Mishnah with such catch-phrases as *הכא במאי עסקינן* (ostensibly, what case is being discussed?) or *חסורי מחסרה* (there was a lacuna in the Mishnah, which is then filled in).

A full discussion of those examples, beyond our scope here, need not hinder our discussion, for several reasons. First, those techniques are used relatively rarely in the Talmud, at least as compared to how often we find them in the authors we will be studying. Second, those examples seem to occur when the Talmud assumes the result before it reads the earlier text (exactly when the Talmud does so is a complex topic of its own); the authors in this study would have no reason to assume that the Mishnah must have intended their innovative readings, especially given the hundreds of years of previous commentators who had not offered such readings. Third, even if we concede that these scholars were simply reviving a mode of exegesis that the Talmud used, but that medieval scholars had only used in Biblical exegesis, it would be historically noteworthy.

rabbinically authored texts.³ In addition, they stressed innovative interpretation in a way that their predecessors had not, again alerting us to a change in mindset.

At least in Avot, these authors treated each part of the text as significant, such that it could repeatedly yield new interpretations. In doing so, they thoroughly altered the definition of acceptable meaning and/or interpretation, leading to a greater freedom in the kinds of ideas they could assume the tractate was discussing.

Even were that change to only have occurred within Avot interpretation, we would see it as worthy of study, since the tractate enunciates many fundamental principles of Jewish faith and behavior. As commentators developed more freedom to read Avot as they wished, they also gained the hermeneutical room to shape the messages of the text to accord with their pre-existing views of what the religion wants and means.⁴

Adding to our interest in the topic, scholars such as D. Boyarin and his teacher H. Z. Dimitrovsky⁵ have already shown that the rules of Talmudic textual interpretation changed around this time as well. As we review the significant similarities in developments in the two areas of textual study, we will realize that Avot serves as a convenient locus within which to study a more general intellectual shift among fifteenth century Spanish Jews, alerting us to an element of the period's intellectual history that has gone unnoticed.

THE THREE INNOVATORS IN THE STUDY

The three scholars we see as having initiated that shift-- R. Mattitiah haYizhari, R. Joseph Hayyun, and the well-known R. Isaac Abarbanel—each contributed meaningfully to altering the accepted hermeneutic of Avot. A brief introduction of each will provide a first sense of the role they played.

We know very little about haYizhari, other than that he lived in Saragossa at the end of his life, and was a member of the Jewish delegation at the Disputation at Tortosa in 1413.⁶ In the

³ Modern scholars have raised the issue of Avot's linguistic relationship to the Bible and the Mishnah in several contexts. Before reviewing them briefly, we should again stress that *medieval* authors assumed it to be Mishnaic. Our three commentators' assuming that they could read Avot as they would the Bible is therefore an important intellectual event in the milieu of the time.

That having been said, E. Z. Melamed, *Studies in Talmudic Literature*, (Hebrew, Magnes Press: Jerusalem, 1986), p. 238, notes that Avot uses several words in their Biblical sense rather than their Mishnaic one. However, S. Sharvit, who studied Avot's language extensively, concludes that those examples, while noticeable, are not typical; by and large, he sees Avot's language as more Mishnaic than Biblical, see S. Sharvit, *נוסחאותיה אבות ולשונה של מסכת אבות* (*Versions and Language of Tractate Avot*, PhD Diss.: Bar-Ilan, 1976), pp. 6-15.

⁴ A most extreme example is the nineteenth century commentary of R. Shlomo Kluger, which reads every term in Avot as actually a code for some completely different topic. That commentary, which seems to descend from the ones we are studying here, is beyond the scope of the present inquiry.

⁵ For Boyarin, see "Moslem, Christian, and Jewish Cultural Interaction in Sefardic Talmudic Interpretation" *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 5:1 (2002), pp. 1-33, and *העיון הספרדי* (Spanish Talmudic Study, Ben-Zvi Institute: Jerusalem, 1989); for Dimitrovsky, see "יעקב בירב בצפת בית מדרשו של ר" (The Academy of R. Jacob Berab in Safed), *Sefunot* 7 (1963), pp. 43-102, and "על דרך הפלפול" (On the Method of Pilpul) Salo Baron Jubilee Volume (Proceedings of the American Academy of Jewish Research), (1975), vol. III p. 113-82.

⁶ See D. Rappel, introduction to his edition of haYizhari's *פירוש אלף בית* (*Commentary on Psalm 119*), p. 9. HaYizhari's work only exists in manuscript (I used a copy of the Houghton manuscript, with the kind permission of M. Shmidman). There is also a Sassoon manuscript of most of the work, described in Sassoon's catalogue, *אהל דוד*, (*Tent of David*) pp. 531-6. Aside from the several citations in *נהלת אבות* (Inheritance of the Fathers, Abarbanel's commentary on Avot) and *מדרש שמואל*, (a famous sixteenth century commentary/anthology on Avot written by R. Samuel Uceda), several parts of the work have been published. Sassoon has some excerpts in *אהל דוד* (*Tent of David*); Shmidman published two other excerpts in *R. Joseph ibn Shoshan and Medieval Commentaries on Abot* (PhD Diss., Harvard, 1980), and one more in "An Excerpt from the Abot Commentary of R. Mattathias ha-Yizhari" in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, ed. I. Twersky (Harvard U. Press: Cambridge, 1979), pp. 315-336.

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opening to his work he notes that he only turned to Avot interpretation at the end of his life, so we can assume that he wrote the Avot commentary somewhere in that chronological vicinity.⁷

As the earliest of the three, we might think that haYizhari should be credited as the sole father of this innovation. However, haYizhari's general lack of influence already raises questions about that assumption.⁸ In addition, such commentary did not become widespread until several decades after his death. While later commentators *may* have reached back to a little-known author to justify reading rabbinic texts Biblically, it seems unlikely.⁹

HaYizhari's way of reading Avot was, however, adopted by the much more famous R. Isaac Abarbanel (1437-1508)¹⁰ in his Avot commentary, **נחלת אבות**, Inheritance of the Fathers. Abarbanel was born in Portugal to a distinguished family, where he rose to high position in the government.

In 1483, he fled Portugal, having been implicated, he claimed falsely, in an attempt on the king's life. In Spain, he again succeeded in government service, becoming one of King Ferdinand's trusted advisors, a position that ended with the Expulsion of 1492. He went to Italy, where he would make many stops in search of safety and security. As he moved from place to place, his pattern--success followed by a need to flee and abandon what had been accomplished--repeated itself several times.

Although he wrote some works before leaving Portugal and some in Spain, he did most of his prodigious writing only after 1492.¹¹ He wrote several treatises about the arrival of the Messiah, and commentaries on the Pentateuch, most of the Prophets, the Passover *haggadah*, Maimonides' *Guide*, and **נחלת אבות**, Inheritance of the Fathers, a commentary on the Mishnaic tractate Avot.

That commentary echoes many of the innovations in reading we will find in haYizhari, meaning they shared an exegetical stance. In addition, Abarbanel quotes haYizhari directly more often than any other commentator except Maimonides, suggesting that he recognized his reliance on the earlier scholar.

One other commentary complicates the picture, preventing us from claiming that Abarbanel learned this new hermeneutic solely from reading haYizhari's writings. R. Joseph ibn Hayyun, a fifteenth century rabbi in Lisbon and apparently one of Abarbanel's teachers,¹² also read Avot—and

Much of the biographical material comes from haYizhari's introductory comments to Avot, in which he refers to his family as having lived in Narbonne until being exiled from there, ending up in Saragossa. These few biographical facts were first published by I. Loeb "R. Mattatya Ha-Yichari" *REJ* VII (1883), pp. 153-55.

⁷ A. Ravitzky, "In that Path that a Man Wishes to Go, They [Heaven] Lead Him?" The Paradoxical Conception of Free Will in Mattathias ha-Yizhari" in *From Rome to Jerusalem: The Joseph Baruch Sermoneta Memorial Volume* (Hebrew) ed. A. Ravitzky (Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought XIV, 1998), p. 251, n. 42, assumes without evidence that haYizhari wrote the commentary before the Disputation.

⁸ Most of his works, including his commentary on Avot, a book of homilies on the weekly Torah reading and the holidays, and a series of comments on Abraham ibn Ezra's Biblical commentary were never printed; one published work was the commentary on Psalm 119 referred to above, note 6.

⁹ Several important late fifteenth century commentators, notably R. Obadiah Bertinoro and R. Joseph Yavets, show few signs of haYizhari's innovations; the later we find that this mode of reading had become the norm, the less likely we find it that haYizhari was the sole originator of this hermeneutic.

¹⁰ Many academics prefer Abravanel, but recent opinion seems to have swung in favor of Abarbanel, particularly in light of S. Leiman's comments in "Abarbanel and the Censor," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 19 (1968), p. 49, note 1. For the most recent retelling of Abarbanel's life, see E. Lawee, *Isaac Abarbanel's Stance Toward Tradition: Defense, Dissent, and Dialogue* (SUNY: Albany, 2001), 9-58. Before that, the most complete monograph was B. Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abarbanel* (JPS: Philadelphia, 1972); see p. 3 and p. 87 for dates of his birth and death.

¹¹ Lawee, pp. 48-57, arranges them chronologically and provides insightful characterizations of each.

¹² A. Gross, Hayyun's modern biographer, makes the argument for his impact on Abarbanel in "R. Joseph Hayyun and R. Isaac Abarbanel—Intellectual Contacts" (Hebrew) *Michael* 11, eds. E. Gutwirth and S.

Biblical texts-- in this way. Although Hayyun's commentary, *מילי דאבות*, *Matters of Avot*, was only first published in 1972,¹³ it is likely that Abarbanel knew it or at least had discussed some of those texts with Hayyun so that that commentary forms some of the background to Inheritance of the Fathers.

Since we have no evidence that haYizhari and Hayyun knew each other, their both employing a novel reading strategy (within the context of Avot) points toward some earlier common source. Whatever that source was, its impact apparently spread slowly in fifteenth century commentary. After Abarbanel, meaning by the end of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth centuries, numerous commentators use these kinds of techniques.

None of these authors, we should candidly confess, notably enriched the content or concepts of Avot. In a different context, Eric Lawee, one of Abarbanel's leading modern students, has noted that "modern scholarly assessments" of Abarbanel as unoriginal have some accuracy in speaking of his "theological legacy", where Lawee agrees that it "is, on the whole, light on dramatic innovation," although even there he finds some "significant novelties."

In exegesis, though, Lawee points out that "one often does find distinctiveness, creative synthesis, and innovation of the sort Abarbanel frequently claims for himself."¹⁴ That characterization applies to all three Avot commentators we are focusing on here, and it is their exegetical richness that we will be tracing in this study.¹⁵

To properly prove that our commentators inaugurated a significant shift in Avot interpretation, we need to first survey the methods by which various commentators had derived meaning from the text before these three appeared. Only then can we define how haYizhari, Hayyun, and Abarbanel differed from what had come earlier. Third, we will prove that later readers adopted this method, making the development more than just a blip on the radar of the past.

Most of the rest of this introduction lays the groundwork for those several pieces of this study. First, we will review the exegetical techniques long considered relevant to Biblical study that will also figure prominently in this study. Such exegesis, however, is bedeviled by the question of meaning, of whether interpretations offered by rabbis of the Talmud or Midrash reflect *the* meaning of the text, *a* meaning of the text, or are examples of a lack of concern with original intent in reading Bible.

We will approach that question by spending a few moments differentiating *derash* and *peshat*, terms that have existed for thousands of years, but still only imperfectly distinguish among the kinds of readings students of Bible can offer. These issues will also arise within Avot interpretation, since using Biblical exegesis confronts us with similar questions as to whether authors were reading Avot for itself or were imposing meanings they wanted upon the text.

READING BIBLE: A RANGE OF OPTIONS

Classical Midrash offers the easiest entry into the range of exegetical techniques seen as acceptable in Biblical commentary. Although not always midrashic in a technical sense, these ways of reading texts were typical of Midrash. When we see later commentators begin to act the same way with Avot, we will then recognize the novelty in what they were doing.

Simonsohn (Tel Aviv, 1989), pp. 23-27. He echoes that point in his volume-length intellectual biography of Hayyun, *מנהיג קהילת ליסבון ויצירתו*: ר' יוסף בן אברהם חיון (Rabbi Joseph Son of Abraham Hayyun: The Leader of the Community of Lisbon and His Works, Bar Ilan: Tel-Aviv, 1993), p. 47. Note that H.Z. Dimitrovsky, "בית מדרשו של ר' יעקב בירב בצפת", *Sefunot* 7, p. 82, places Abarbanel in the academy of R. Isaac Abohab.

¹³ In Blechrovitz and Kasher, eds. *מסכת אבות עם פירושי ראשונים*, Tractate Avot with Medieval Commentaries (Jerusalem, 1972).

¹⁴ Lawee, pp. 211-212.

¹⁵ Note Lawee's brief comments on page 50-1 and his important note on p. 262, note 1, to which we will return below.

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I. Heinemann's central theme, in his classic discussion of midrash,¹⁶ is that the Rabbis of the Midrash saw Scripture as almost infinitely meaningful, deriving layers upon layers of meaning by analyzing each unit of language available.

A fundamental principle underlying these various interpretations was the commonly accepted view that a single verse could be **יוצא לכמה טעמים**, could be used to derive several ideas or principles, which concomitantly signified that each verse could have several correct (or useful) meanings.¹⁷

In fact, as Heinemann notes, not only would the Midrash register several interpretations of a single verse, often the same rabbi would offer multiple readings of a text. This is particularly true in names; while Scripture may give one etymology for a name, the Rabbis will give many.¹⁸

The Rabbis will also read one passage in the context of a distant (and not clearly related) one, based on their assumption that Scripture was a **ספר אחיד**, a unified text.¹⁹ That assumption also best explains their practice of allowing seemingly insignificant details to connect distant stories.

For example, **פרקי דרבי אליעזר**, Chapters of R. Eliezer 30, an eighth century collection of Midrashic readings of Scripture, asserts that the donkey that Abraham rode to the Binding of Isaac was the same one that Moses rode into Egypt, and also the one that the Messiah will ride in the future. The point is not the historical reality of the identity of the donkeys, but the emphasis on the presence of the donkey as a sign of the similarity of their missions.²⁰ Similarly, Moses merited speaking to God **"פנים אל פנים"**, face to face because when he first heard that God was speaking to him **"ויסתר את פניו"**, he hid his face.²¹

The Rabbis subjected each unit of a text to analysis, because they assumed would have a novel point to make. One notable example is their tendency to interpret literally the use of a plural word to indicate a singular and vice versa. When Sarah (or others, depending on how one reads the verse) expresses her joy and surprise at the birth of Isaac by using the phrase **הניקה בנים שרה**, Sarah has nursed a child, the simple reading of the verse means that she was overjoyed at her ability to nurse her (one) son at such an advanced age.

Picking up on the plural of the word **בנים**, sons, which could be dismissed as just a poetic mode of expression, the Midrash asserts that other women brought *their* children to Sarah and she also nursed them, allowing her to prove that her nursing of Isaac was no trick.²² Similarly, we find a Midrash that reads literally the idiomatic phrase that Jephthah was buried **בערי גלעד**, in the cities of Gilead, saying that his body was cut into pieces.²³ In reverse, one source suggests that Jacob had only one ox and donkey, since he tells Esau **ויהי לי שור וחמור**, and I have ox and donkey, using the singular for each.²⁴

¹⁶ Heinemann, **דרכי האגדה**, *The Ways of Aggadah* (Jerusalem, 1954). While others have noted that Heinemann's study is now dated, Y. Fraenkel's **דרכי האגדה והמדרש**, *The Ways of Aggadah and Midrash*, 2 vols. (Jerusalem, 1991) does not substantially differ from Heinemann in his articulation of exegetical techniques, as noted by R. Kalmin in his review, "The Modern Study of Ancient Rabbinic Literature: Yonah Fraenkel's *Darkhei ha'aggadah vehamidrash*," *Prooftexts* 14 (1994), 189-204.

¹⁷ Heinemann, p. 12, with sources in endnote 107, p. 201.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, at note 109a, pp. 201 and 112.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 56. This view also fuels the Rabbis' efforts to link texts to the ones that come immediately before and after, another tendency of Abarbanel's.

²⁰ See p. 208, note 50, where Heinemann cites Abarbanel's interpretation of this comment.

²¹ Exodus Rabbah, 3:1, cited on p. 67.

²² Genesis 21:7, with *Sanhedrin* 87a.

²³ Judges 12:7, as interpreted in *Genesis Rabbah* 60:3.

²⁴ P. 118.

This hyperliteralism could be used on adjectives as well. When God is referred to as a **בעל** **חמה**, one who gets angry, we find the Midrashic interpretation that the phrase means He fully controls His anger, using **בעל** in its sense of master rather than its idiomatic meaning of one who has a certain characteristic.²⁵ Too, Noah is an **איש אדמה**, a person of the land, not only because he is a man who works the land, but also because he was preoccupied with thoughts of the land. For this Midrash, **איש** means a personal characteristic as well as the central focus of a person's life.²⁶

In this mode of reading, words can be defined based on their usage in a parallel citation. A famous case appears in the Passover Haggadah²⁷ where the phrase **יד חזקה**, a strong arm,²⁸ is taken to mean pestilence, because Scripture uses the phrase **יד ה'**, the Hand of God, when announcing that plague.²⁹ Even God's Hand can presumably have many manifestations (as does He Himself); that reading, however, assumes that the connotations of the word **יד** in one place must be legitimate wherever it appears.

The Rabbis of the Midrash will also assume a different actor in a verb from the one Scripture intended, as in the first phrase of the Book of Ruth, **ויהי בימי שפט השפטים**, which literally means "and it was in the days that the Judges were judging." Heinemann notes the Midrash's comment **אוי לדור ששופטין את שופטיהן**, "woe to the generation that judges their Judges (or leaders)," seeing the Judges as the object of the verb rather than the subject.³⁰

Manipulating the assumed pointing of a word can also yield new meanings for students of Bible, as in the celebrated case of Beruriah's upbraiding her husband, the Mishnaic scholar R. Meir, for praying for the death of neighborhood highwaymen. Citing Psalms 104:35, Beruriah pointed out that the verse calls for an end to **הטאים**, sins, not **חוטאים**, sinners.³¹

Heinemann points out, though, that Beruriah's position founders on the traditional pointing of the verse, a **פתח** under the first letter and a **קמץ** under the second, which in fact *does* mean sinners. Beruriah's reading pretended that the word was written with a **פתח** **הטף** **פתח** and a **פתח**, which yields the words sins.³²

Beruriah's rereading implicitly uses a technique the Rabbis often used explicitly, the **אל תקרי**, the "don't read the word as this, but as this" manipulation. In such cases, the Rabbis openly admitted that they were substituting their own reading for what the text actually said, often by repointing a key word.³³

Perhaps the most famous example is cited in the traditional Friday night liturgy, where the Talmud³⁴ re-reads Isaiah 54:13. The verse says "and all your sons (**בניך**) will be learned of the Lord, and there will be much peace among your sons" which, in context, sounds like a statement about all inhabitants of Jerusalem. The Talmud, however, adjures "**אל תקרי בניך אלא בוניך**," do not read it as "your sons" but as 'your builders,' by which the Talmud means Torah Sages, who foster the growth of cities by the peace they bring to its midst.

²⁵ Genesis Rabbah 49.

²⁶ Heinemann, p. 121.

²⁷ Also in *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, Version 2, Chapter 11.

²⁸ As in Exodus 32:11; the phrase metaphorically refers to the manner in which God will take the Jews out of Egypt.

²⁹ Exodus 9:3; see Heinemann, pp. 122-3.

³⁰ Heinemann, p. 125.

³¹ *Midrash Tehillim* 104, Heinemann, p. 126.

³² Heinemann assumes that the pointing pre-dated this story, which is questionable. In noting this to me, Prof. Jay Harris offered a clearer challenge to Beruriah's reading, that the parallel phrase in the verse, **ורשעים עוד אינם**, and evildoers will be no more, strongly supports interpreting **הטאים** as sinners, not sins.

³³ Heinemann, page 127.

³⁴ Berakhot 64a.

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More radically, Rabbis of the Talmud sometimes simply replace one word with another, as when R. Safra inserts **ושלשתם**, you should divide it into three, into the verse **“ושוננתם לבניך”**, and you shall teach it to your children.”³⁵ This allows him to assert an obligation to divide one’s study of Torah equally among Scripture, law, and inferences about the law.³⁶

To summarize, the Rabbis make several assumptions about Scripture that free them to offer readings of the text that seem to stray far from literal or intended meaning: 1) It is completely unified, so that words in one place can be defined in light of their use in other places in Scripture. 2) There is no need to adjudicate among multiple and incompatible readings; this indicates a multilayered view of the text, in which all those readings are acceptable. 3) All parts of Scripture are significant, so that every particle of speech can be examined for the meaning it provides. 4) It is fluid, so that the traditional reading need not be the only useful one.

PESHAT AND DERASH: WHAT DO TEXTS ‘MEAN’?

Seeing the range of acceptable hermeneutical moves in the reading of Bible leads naturally to the question of what can be considered legitimate readings of a text, and whether they need to be seeking the text’s original meaning. For us, the same question will arise once we have shown that medieval and early modern commentators were treating Avot as the earlier rabbis had treated Bible.

In Biblical contexts, the question often arose in the discussions of the distinction between **פשט** and **דרש**, *peshat* and *derash*. Loosely speaking, the terms distinguish literal meaning from elastic readings acceptable to the system at a level other than the literal. Actually, though, the terms are notoriously difficult to define.³⁷ On the *peshat* side, scholars have come to realize that earlier discussions erred in representing *peshat* as the “simple,” “plain,” or “literal” meaning.³⁸ Indeed, in a classic study, R. Loewe suggested that the term, as used in literature up to the end of the period of the Talmuds, was best translated as “authoritative teaching,”³⁹ which sheds little light on what kinds of readings qualified as *peshat*.

The current consensus definition seems to be that *peshat* is the “contextual meaning,” which is not always the same as literal meaning. In defending the move, S. Garfinkel writes that “it is a

³⁵ Prof. James Kugel pointed out to me that the actual word in the verse, **ושוננתם**, could be taken as referring to studying texts twice, so the Talmud is turning twice into three times.

³⁶ *Kiddushin* 30a. See also Heinemann, pp. 133-34, where he notes that the rabbis will attribute a verse to a different author than the one the text identifies. He explains that, “according to their belief in a text of multiple meanings, and the independence of its various parts, our rabbis believed that the verses intended not only the subject that they speak about in the literal reading, but also on another, even more important, subject.” Fraenkel, p. 109, notes that it is not possible always to tell whether the rabbi thought that the text *meant* what he was suggesting, or simply thought that the rules allowed other readings.

³⁷ See E. Z. Melamed, **מפרשי המקרא, דרכיהם, ושיטותיהם**, *Biblical Exegetes, Their Ways, and Methods* (Magnes Press: Jerusalem, 1978), p. 3, who posits this dichotomy as fundamental to all Jewish interpretation. See also S. Garfinkel, “Applied *Peshat*: Historical-Critical Method and Religious Meaning” *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 22 (1993), p. 20, who sees as “most significant ... whether a method fits the category of *peshat* or of *derash*,” and D. Weiss Halivni, *Peshat and Derash: Plain and Applied Meaning in Rabbinic Exegesis* (Oxford U. Press: New York, 1991), p. ix: “I have come to believe that the problem of *peshat* and *derash* lies at the nerve center of rabbinic interpretation and that its examination... is a prime desideratum of Jewish scholarship.”

³⁸ See Garfinkel, p. 21, and those cited below.

³⁹ R. Loewe, “The ‘Plain’ Meaning of Scripture in Early Jewish Exegesis” in *Papers of the Institute for Jewish Studies London, Volume 1* (1964), ed. J.G. Weiss, reprinted by Brown Classics in Judaica, 1989, pp. 140-185. As Loewe noted, blurring the definition of *peshat* makes the distinction with *derash* more difficult, and perhaps impossible, to maintain.

poor language which does not reach beyond literality, a harsh, prosaic language without idiom ...ironically, it is often the *midrashic* meaning that latches onto the literal sense."⁴⁰

Y. Elman has asserted that the text's entire historical provenance must be determined to find the *peshat*. For him that requires uncovering (in his list of relevant factors) the political, cultural, religious, socio-economic, linguistic, geographic, structural, and literary backgrounds of the text, as well as resolving relevant text-critical issues.⁴¹

Perhaps the best expression of the quandary in which this view of *peshat* leaves us is F. Kermodé's realization that "the plain sense is not accessible to plain common sense... plain senses can be tricky to translate."⁴² Since *peshat* depends on context, the assumed context of the interpreter becomes vital to the determination of meaning. Kermodé again:

For Christian commentators, the Psalms belong to a whole different from the whole to which they belong for Jewish commentators. They may agree that there are messianic psalms, but the plain sense of such psalms must be different for each, since the whole text of Christianity shows the fulfillment of the messianic promises.⁴³

The importance of contextual accuracy also means that exegetes almost necessarily incorporate their own worldviews and assumptions into even their "plain" interpretation of the text. As Daniel Boyarin has written:

...all interpretation...is *representation* of the past by the present, that is, that there is no such thing as value-free, true, and objective rendering of documents. They are always fettered through the cultural, socio-ideological matrix of their readers.⁴⁴

Once opened, the door to seeing non-literal readings as *peshat*-- in that they are attempts to capture the "real" meaning of the text in context-- is not so easy to close. I. Gruenwald has pointed out that "an interpreter can do with the scriptural word...almost anything *he considers* fitting and proper."⁴⁵ Interpreters can do so, I would add, without necessarily recognizing that they have altered the meaning of the text.⁴⁶ Since context is essential even to *peshat* meaning, the range of legitimacy will depend solely on each exegete's assumptions about proper context.

E. Wolfson has shown an extreme example of this view of contextual meaning in his discussions of kabbalistic hermeneutics. Wolfson notes that for Nahmanides and the Zohar, the *sod* or kabbalistic esoteric meaning of a text sometimes shows an alternate acceptable *peshat*, sometimes the depth of that *peshat*, and sometimes the only meaningful *peshat* of a Scriptural verse.⁴⁷

Broadening the horizons of *peshat* so much leaves little room for clarity in the other half of the dichotomy, *derash*. Indeed, some scholars have despaired of defining *derash*, accepting J. Kugel's assessment that since other "studies have already not defined midrash in ample detail, there is little purpose in our not defining it again here."

⁴⁰ Garfinkel, p. 21.

⁴¹ Y. Elman, "'It Is No Empty Thing': Nahmanides and the Search for Omnisignificance," *Torah U-Madda Journal* 4 (1993), p. 61, note 13.

⁴² F. Kermodé, "The Plain Sense of Things," in *Midrash and Literature*, p. 182.

⁴³ *ibid.* p. 181.

⁴⁴ Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Indiana U. Press: Bloomington, 1990), p. 12. See also J. Kugel, *The Bible As It Was* (Belknap: Cambridge, 1997), pp. 3-5.

⁴⁵ I. Gruenwald "Midrash and the Midrashic Condition: Preliminary Considerations" in *The Midrashic Imagination*, ed. M. Fishbane (SUNY Press: Albany, 1993), p. 11, emphasis added.

⁴⁶ E.Z. Melamed, above, note 37, p. 5.

⁴⁷ E. Wolfson, "Beautiful Maiden Without Eyes: *Peshat* and *Sod* in Zoharic Hermeneutics" in Fishbane, *The Midrashic Imagination*, pp. 155-203, pp. 161, 172, and 185. See also *idem*, "By Way of Truth: Aspects of Nahmanides' Kabbalistic Hermeneutic," *AJSReview* 14 (1989), pp. 153, 158, and 161.

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Kugel himself goes on to suggest that midrash is an “interpretive stance”, a way of reading texts.⁴⁸ We have already realized, though, that *every* reader adopts some such stance, some theoretical system of beliefs that determines one's understanding of a text and the operations of interpretation by which one applies those beliefs to specific texts.⁴⁹

Speaking of interpretive stance does not yet allow us to clearly distinguish *peshat* from *derash*.

Other definitions of *derash*, such as the attempt to be creative or to relate the text to one's own reality,⁵⁰ still do not sufficiently differentiate the two. In Gruenwald's words, "*peshat* and *derash* are often redundant. The 'real *peshat*' for one side may look like 'bizarre *derash*' for another." He suggests ignoring the whole issue of whether an interpretation qualifies as *peshat* or *derash*, in order to better study the various “midrashic conditions” of interpretive texts.

That strategy, valid and welcome in many contexts, relinquishes the ability to classify exegetes by the accuracy or plausibility of their rendering of texts. In such a world, scholars could only identify commentators' exegetical assumptions, and then understand how, using those assumptions, each one explained the text.⁵¹

By obviating the issue of judging the plausibility of earlier works' interpretations, Gruenwald's suggestion leads scholars instead draw the valuable exegetical, philosophical and theological information that resides in each, but it should be unsatisfying to historians for two reasons.

First, it completely forfeits a distinction that Jewish readers have found meaningful for thousands of years; in trying to understand those Jews' intellectual history, some sense of what they meant by these terms is necessary. Second, it hinders historians' ability to periodize exegetes, to identify paradigm shifts within exegesis, the exact goal of this study. If historians can go no further than discussing each author's “midrashic condition,” they lose an important tool for distinguishing between ordinary individual variation within a particular paradigm and a historically meaningful change of model.

We prefer, therefore, to find a way to accept the importance of context in interpretation, to adopt a pluralistic view of hermeneutics that allows us to see the value in each of a range of interpretive stances, and yet to still be able to decide whether those readers offer *peshat* or *derash* renderings of the text.

DEFINING PESHAT: BLACK, WHITE, AND SOME GRAY

Perhaps threes will work better than twos. Instead of trying to completely separate *peshat* from *derash*, we find it more productive to see some readings as clearly *peshat*, some as *derash*, and recognize that some occupy a gray area whose *peshat* status is arguable. Such a triad is offered by D. Halivni, who writes of “the plain meaning of a text,” by which he means

the meaning that scrupulously follows the tenor of the words and the thrust of the context... Allegorization or metaphorization preserve the surface meaning; *reading in* displaces the surface meaning...allegorization burdens the text, strains it, *reading in* changes the text.⁵²

⁴⁸ Kugel, “Two Introductions to Midrash” in *Midrash and Literature*, p. 91.

⁴⁹ Wolfson, “By Way of Truth” p. 108.

⁵⁰ Gary G. Porton, “Defining Midrash” in J. Neusner, *The Study of Ancient Judaism*, vol. 1 (KTAV: New York, 1981), p. 59.

⁵¹ Gruenwald, 12-14.

⁵² David Weiss Halivni, *Peshat and Derash: Plain and Applied Meaning in Rabbinic Exegesis* (Oxford U. Press: New York, 1991), pp. 5-6, emphasis added.

By adding a third category, Halivni relieves some of the pressure from the other two. *Peshat* encompasses those interpretations that the general reader would agree are attempts to construe the meaning of the text in its original context.

Allegory, metaphor, and other such hermeneutic techniques (which we will see in our discussion of pre-Abarbanel exegesis) may also provide contextual meaning, but less obviously so, and only by accepting certain assumptions that may not be universal. Such readings qualify as *peshat* only debatably and constitute the battleground between adherents of various hermeneutic systems.

Beyond those, however, Halivni reminds us of situations where the reader is clearly *reading in*, where even the exegete does not really claim to offer the contextual meaning of the text. Such readings, which we can comfortably call *derash*, identifiably differ from the others in their interpretive stance.

An example of each of these kinds of interpretation, applied to the first words of Avot, “Moses received Torah from Sinai, and entrusted it to Joshua,” will clarify the three categories. The minimalist’s approach, the one most easily accepted as *peshat*, strives for simple translation. Disagreements in translation occur in some cases, but are relatively narrow. In our case, commentators might disagree over the definition of Torah, what קבל (received) means, and so on. Even so, they would agree that the phrase signifies that some person named Moses did something with an item called Torah.

Many commentators offer their explanations as if they were only translating the text, giving its authentic meaning (or, for some scholars, the options for authentic meaning). These rabbis may have fully believed that they were uncovering, recovering, or discovering truths embedded in the original text, the *peshat* of the text.

Ideally, the identity and background of the reader would be irrelevant in *peshat*, since it is supposed to represent the text and its meaning, not the person deciphering that meaning. Yet perhaps because of the very need for context we discussed above, factors other than the original text and its natural context often infect attempts at objective interpretation.⁵³

Probably unconsciously, perhaps even unwillingly, innate personal tendencies as well as the attitudes and ideas nurtured by their particular historical, social, economic, and intellectual conditions affected Jewish scholars’ readings of texts. Those needs, combined with the grammatical ambiguities that inhere in any text, explain the development of the second type of readings Halivni noted. While Halivni spoke of obvious examples such as metaphor and allegory, such “extratextual” readings can be more subtle as well.

We will count as extratextual any reading that assumes more about the text than just the universally accepted linguistic and semantic context. When a medieval rabbi assumes that the Mishnah was referring to an Aristotelian ideal, or a kabbalistic one, for example, we call that extratextual because Avot offers no direct evidence that those modes of thought were relevant to its interpretation. Without denying that Rabbis of the Mishnah may indeed have assumed Aristotelian ideals or kabbalistic ones, either claim involves assumptions external to the text itself.

Those assumptions are not only debatable, they most often are the places in a commentary where the interpreter’s own intellectual context can be seen as subtly affecting his reading of the text at hand. They therefore become a prime place for historians to find the interpreter’s agenda subtly inserted into his reading of Avot or any other text.

Once a text’s words have been defined and obvious relevant context offered, any other claims become ripe for investigation. They may turn out to accurately reconstruct what the original writer meant, but they may just as likely teach more about the interpreter than the original text.

⁵³ Even in the area of Jewish law, whose practitioners were most explicitly devoted to discovering an independent objective truth, historians such as Jacob Katz and Haym Soloveitchik have shown how, throughout history, external developments affected decisions. See J. Katz’ *Exclusiveness and Tolerance* (New York: Behrman House, 1961) and *The “Shabbos Goy,”* trans. Y. Lerner (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), and H. Soloveitchik’s *עצמי, כלכלה, הלכה, ודימוי עצמי, Law, Economics, and Self-Image* (Magnes Press: Jerusalem, 1985).

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A *peshat* reading, in this scheme, is one that follows the rules of grammar and interprets the words in the text according to their most common (or one of the generally acceptable) meanings, using only the information in that text itself. Such readings offer little for historians (other than those who analyze the history of Hebrew grammar), since the exegete may have been simply responding to the demands of the text, at least consciously.

Extratextual readings, which some readers may consider *peshat* (depending on what they see as proper context), tell about the author who offered them as well as about Avot, since they reveal the assumptions he found acceptable in reading the tractate. Collecting and analyzing each author's extratextual comments can also uncover recurring emphases, suggesting themes important to that author that other readers would not have seen in the text at hand.

Some texts are so unclear as to almost require extratextuality, to the point that that interpretation may seem like simple translation. In “משה קבל תורה,” a *peshat* translator would write “Moses received Torah,” with the verb serving to describe the action that the subject, Moses, performed with the object, Torah.

Torah, though, can refer to the Pentateuch, all of Scripture, or the Oral and Written Law that tradition claims was transmitted at Sinai. Which of these it means is a necessary part of properly interpreting the Mishnah, but the choice of any particular definition has an extratextual element, since Avot does not tell us which it means.

Extratextual commentary also happens when the reader makes assumptions or adds information the text alone did not require. An author who discussed *how* Moses learned the Torah from God as part of his exegesis would be adding an extratextual element to his commentary, but still arguably staying within the realm of simple interpretation.

Other extratextual modes of interpretation include: adding ideas, connections, or context that the text neither indicates nor contradicts; relating a saying in a Mishnah to events from the life of its author; and reading a statement in the context of some truth extraneous to the text at hand, or not.

Granting the existence of those kinds of extratextual readings still leaves room to recognize readings that make little plausible claim to represent the original intent of the text. Such readings will become prominent in the sixteenth century, and qualify as the kinds of reading in, to use Halivni's phrase, that are the almost inevitable outcome of the hermeneutics introduced in the fifteenth century.

SCRIPTURE AND OTHER TEXTS: WHICH WERE OPEN TO MIDRASHIC INTERPRETATION?

“Readings in” such as we find in Midrash assumed that the text “meant” in ways beyond those of normal language; these techniques were only accepted in certain texts. Heinemann notes that these *derashot* reflect an assumption that Scripture was open to meanings other than those arrived at in any of the ordinary senses of contextual interpretation, not an inability to recognize the simplest sense of texts.⁵⁴

However, texts other than Scripture are among the sacred texts of the religion, even if medieval Jews did not see them as divinely inspired.⁵⁵ One such text, edited around the turn of the

⁵⁴ P. 129.

⁵⁵ The question of divine inspiration of texts connects to some extent to issues of canonization. Part of the selection of only some texts to canonize was the implicit claim that those texts were the ones that Jews would henceforth treat with the full reverence due Scripture. For some discussion of the canonization of Scripture, meaning when Jews decided to treat these texts in a different manner from all others, see S. Leiman, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence* (Conn. Acad. of Arts and Sciences: Hamden, Conn., 1976, *The Old Testament*, ed. S. Bigger (Basil Blackwell: Oxford, 1989), and M. Halbertal, “People of the Book: Canon, Meaning, and Authority (Harvard U. Press: Cambridge, 1997).

third century, was the Mishnah, which recorded brief rulings on Jewish law, reviewing the major opinions of a topic, and occasionally some of the rabbinic debate about the issue.

The Mishnah is collected in tractates loosely focused on a single central topic. Avot, which we will discuss in a moment, is a tractate of the Mishnah. Until haYizhari and Abarbanel's foray into Avot, medievals had generally treated the Mishnah and Avot in particular, differently from Scripture.

The distinction between Scripture and all other classical Jewish texts is vital to the issues of exegesis we have already raised. Since Scripture was seen as Divinely inspired, the Sages read it as omnisignificant, in Kugel's felicitous phrasing,⁵⁶ allowing each and every piece of text to convey some sort of meaning.

Such readings were not generally offered for human writings,⁵⁷ which were understood to include elements that added nothing to the text, had a single meaning--perhaps two-- and were generally dependent on the grammar of language. In fact, Heinemann points out that R. Judah haLevi's eleventh-century *Kuzari* already specifically distinguishes Scripture from other texts in defending rabbinic exegesis.⁵⁸ It is not that the Rabbis were insensitive to proper interpretation of texts, haLevi writes, just that they read Divinely inspired words differently.

WHY LOOK IN AVOT?

Having distinguished sufficiently between *peshat* and *derash* and having noted that medievals saw the techniques we have called midrashic as appropriate for Scripture but not other texts, we can begin to think about haYizhari, Hayyun, and Abarbanel's historical impact. The three of them, we will show, "read in" to Avot using techniques common in Midrash's reading of Bible; since post-Abarbanel exegetes accept these hermeneutic assumptions, these three are properly identified as the first medieval or early modern examples of a new element in Avot interpretation.

To understand why Avot is a good place to look for changes in non-Scriptural exegesis, we need only consider its differences from the rest of the Mishnah.⁵⁹ Avot seems to have been composed later, with some scholars dating it as much as a full generation after the Mishnah.⁶⁰ That

⁵⁶ J. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (Yale U. Press: New Haven, 1981), p. 103.

⁵⁷ For discussion of some counterexamples in the reading of Mishnah, and my thoughts about them, see above, note 2.

⁵⁸ Heinemann, pp. 2-3, citing *Kuzari* III:73.

⁵⁹ The differences between Avot and other tractates of Mishnah have led some scholars to connect it to the Wisdom literature of the Bible, such as Proverbs and Ben-Sira; see, for example, S. Sharvit, *נוסחאותיה ולשוניה של מסכת אבות* *Versions and Language of Tractate Avot*, (PhD Diss.: Bar-Ilan, 1976), p. 6. Kugel, "Wisdom and the Anthological Temper" *Prooftexts* 17 (1997), p. 32, assumes that readers will see Avot as the continuation of the Wisdom literature, and offers other candidates as well.

A. Tropper, *Wisdom, Politics, and Historiography: Tractate Avot in the Context of the Graeco-Roman Near East* (Oxford U. Press, forthcoming), p. 67, concludes a discussion of Avot's similarities to Wisdom literature by affirming that it indeed belongs to the "trajectory" of such literature. On page 77, however, he notes that in some of its techniques, it represents a variation on the original literature. For this and other citations of Tropper's work, I thank him for showing me an early version of his forthcoming book.

As we noted before, this discussion is largely irrelevant in the medieval context, since *they* saw Avot as purely Mishnaic. When haYizhari, et. al. treat it as they would a piece of Bible, they may have intuited an element of Avot that earlier scholars had not, but they were markedly diverging from the tradition of interpretation that preceded them.

⁶⁰ Tropper, *ibid.* Chapter 3 (104-138), discusses the question fully, and concludes that Avot was edited either by Rabbi Judah the Prince or his son Gamliel, meaning at the turn or in the first quarter of the third century.

See also J. Neusner, *The Document Form-History of Rabbinic Literature* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), p. 3. D. Weiss Halivni, "From Midrash to Mishnah," in *The Midrashic Imagination*, pp. 23-44, p. 26, points out that at least one layer of Avot, paragraphs 1:1-16, 2:8, 10-14, were composed much earlier, by the students of Rabbi Yohanan b. Zakkai, in the later first or early second century CE.

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suggestion has minimal impact on this study, however, since medieval and early modern commentators uniformly treat it as Mishnaic.

More importantly, Avot is unique among Mishnaic texts in both its subject matter and form of presentation. Most tractates focus on legal topics, some quite narrow, such as everyday items that may not be used on holidays, the ways to resolve monetary disputes between people, or how to offer sacrifices in the Temple.

Avot deals with general life principles rather than specific rules; instead of technical legal discussions we find comments on proper motives in worship of God and study of Torah, character traits to cultivate and avoid, and life paths to adopt. These topics are not only broad but deep, so that true exegesis of Avot means, to a significant degree, articulating what the reader sees as the Rabbis' categories and rules for a fulfilling and fulfilled life.

Differences of form between Avot and the other tractates also help us choose it as a focus of study. Other tractates develop their ideas by presenting the major dissenting opinions on specific cases of law. That means that commentators had to explain the principles underlying each of the views in a Mishnah, and then decide which opinion should be treated as authoritative.

In contrast, Avot records the thoughts of various rabbis, neither comparing those views to each other (there are no more than a handful of debates recorded in Avot) nor ruling among them. In that sense, a commentator could focus on each insight and clause, without deciding whether it was authoritative, removing a factor that can complicate the exegesis of other rabbinic texts.

Avot lacks a Tosefta or Talmudic elaboration in either the Babylonian or Jerusalem versions of the Talmud, further simplifying the interpreter's task.⁶¹ This lacuna in the Talmudic corpus meant that medieval and modern commentators had the opportunity to develop their readings of the text relatively independently. Avot thus provides an opportunity to study the direct interaction of later scholars and non-Scriptural text, unencumbered by a well-defined tradition of meaning.⁶²

The difference in subject matter and form may have helped Avot become a part of synagogue ritual. Since at least the middle of the ninth century, when R. Amram Gaon included the

⁶¹ J. Neusner, "Form-Analytical Composition in Rabbinic Judaism: Structure and Form" in *The Fathers and The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), p. ix, suggests that *Avot de-Rabi Natan* served as the Talmudic tractate for Avot. M. Lerner "The External Tractates: *Avot de-Rabi Natan*" in *The Literature of the Sages, Part I*, ed. Shmuel Safrai, (Van Gorcum: Assen/ Maastricht, 1987), p. 369 mentions but rejects the claim that *Avot de-Rabi Natan* was the Tosefta for Avot.

Whatever *Avot de-Rabi Natan's* intended original purpose, it did not serve that purpose in the Middle Ages. M. Kister, *Studies in Aboth de-Rabi Nathan: Text, Redaction, and Interpretation* (Hebrew U.: Jerusalem, 1998), pp. 10-11 notes that *Avot de-Rabi Natan* was not widely quoted by medieval scholars. Of course, some commentators cited *Avot de-Rabi Natan*, but for background, not as the authoritative reading of this text. Without judging the correctness of Neusner's idea, then, we can note that it does not reflect the reality of the commentators we will study.

See also N. Kobrin, *מסכת אבות עם בבלי וירושלמי, The Tractate Avot with Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds* (Tel Aviv, 1956), who collects citations of Avot from both Talmuds. As Lerner notes on p. 275 of his article earlier in Safrai's *Literature of the Sages*, "The Tractate Avot," pp. 263-81, Kobrin's work mostly adduces parallels, similar ideas, and quotations of Avot rather than interpretations. That means that medieval commentators were reading the text largely without needing to reconcile their views with an authoritative earlier tradition of the text's meaning.

⁶² Aggadah offered similar opportunities, but is a different type of text from Avot, and needs to be studied separately; see Lawee, p. 262, note 1: "Avot is conventionally viewed as a sui generis mishnaic tractate rather than compendium of midrashic or aggadic statements." Lawee also refers to J. Elbaum's review of M. Saperstein's *Decoding the Rabbis*, "על פרשנות אגדה," *Regarding Exegesis of Aggadab* *Tarbiz* 52 (1982-3), pp. 669-79. He differentiates between Avot and aggadah on p. 674. For Lawee's view of Abarbanel on aggadah, see *Isaac Abarbanel's Stance Toward Tradition*, Chapter 6.

custom in his record of the order of synagogue services, *Seder R. Amram Gaon*, Jews have studied Avot after Shabbat afternoon services.⁶³

Avot's cultural role means that these commentators were not addressing an esoteric text, or one that was only read by the educated or scholarly elite. It was, rather, a text alive for broad swaths of the Jewish people. The steady stream of such commentaries also eases picking out salient contributions, in our case that of haYizhari, Hayyun, and Abarbanel.

THE ROAD AHEAD

In the novel *Shibumi*, a teacher of *Go*, the Japanese game of strategy, gives a favorite pupil his last instructions by analyzing his strengths and weaknesses as a *Go* player. When the student uncomprehendingly asks whether they are spending their last moments together speaking about the game and its play, the teacher answers that they speak of *Go*, but that what is true of *Go* is true of life.

We will spend most of this dissertation speaking of Avot, and have already explained Avot's unique standing in the classical corpus, but we too intend to speak more broadly. We will eventually see that at the same time that these three authors were applying midrashic techniques to Avot, others were doing so in other texts. While we speak of Avot, we will be speaking of fifteenth century Jewish literature at large.

First, we will in fact speak narrowly of Avot, to show that haYizhari, Hayyun, and Abarbanel read the text in all the ways we have seen Heinemann call midrashic, and that were previously reserved for Scripture. To prove that they were innovative in reading texts that way, we will select significant commentaries written prior to (and at the same time as) Abarbanel, and demonstrate that, despite the range of ideas they present in their commentaries, they did not offer midrashic interpretations.

Discovering a method for reading Avot that began and ended in the fifteenth century would be of fairly narrow importance. Proving that haYizhari, Hayyun, and Abarbanel had lasting importance will be our third step, and involves showing that later commentators used these techniques. That will show that the earlier exegetes had changed the landscape of meaning in Avot, not just added new commentaries to the shelf.

R. Samuel de Uceda's *מדרש שמואל* (Legend of Samuel, henceforth *Midrash Shemuel*), written within eighty years of Abarbanel's *Nahalat Avot*,⁶⁴ will be the central vehicle for our accomplishing that third step. Uceda and his near-contemporaries R. Moses Almosnino and R. Solomon le-Beit haLevi (*Lev Avot*) take the limits of exegesis to remarkable lengths. Their fluid "readings in" almost negate the possibility of seeing Avot as a text with a defined subject matter; in their hands, it had become a fertile field in which to find insight on just about whatever topics concerned the author most. The third chapter of the dissertation will offer examples of their readings, to show how far they had taken the tools provided by haYizhari, Hayyun, and Abarbanel.

EXPLAINING THE CHANGE

Change is a question, although the answer is often elusive and speculative. Our final substantive chapter will suggest factors that contributed to this change. In haYizhari's case, we have little to work with, since we know so little about him. Nonetheless, each of the few facts we do possess suggests contributing elements of the change, such as his commentarial interest in Scripture,

⁶³ D. Goldschmidt, ed. *Seder R. 'Amram Gaon* (Mossad haRav Kook: Jerusalem, 1971), p. 80 (in the Hebrew pagination). S. Sharvit "The Custom of Reading Avot on Shabbat and the Formation of the Baraitot That Were Added to It [Avot] in Its Wake" (Hebrew) *Bar-Ilan Annual* 13, pp. 169-187 provides a full discussion of the custom and its effect on the tractate's structure.

⁶⁴J. Cohen, "פירושה ותרגומיה באספקלריית הדורות", *מסכת אבות, Tractate Avot, Its Commentaries and Translations in the Course of Generations* *Kiryat Sefer* (1965), p. 109, gives 1579 for the date of its first publication.

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his involvement in polemics, and perhaps even his relationship to R. Hasdai Crescas, whose philosophical views emphasized God's continual creativity.

Hayyun and Abarbanel shared haYizhari's Scriptural focus and Abarbanel also was concerned with polemics. The two of them have also been connected to R. Isaac Kanpanton, whose innovative method of Talmud study shares some interesting parallels with the exegetical mode we will study here, in particular its assumption that post-Biblical texts should be construed as omnisignificant and its focus on creativity in interpretation.

A last aspect of the development to consider is the intellectual upheaval in the non-Jewish world of the fifteenth century. Elements of developments in those intellectual circles parallel the changes we will uncover here, so we will need to briefly compare the two, to see how much light that sheds on this development.

By the end of that chapter, we hope to have shown that the study of changes in Avot interpretation has made us aware of similar moves within Scriptural (where it was less alien, as it rested firmly on the midrashic tradition already discussed) and Talmudic interpretation. The interest in innovation that spurred much of these exegetical moves may also, we will show, have affected other Jewish intellectual endeavors as well.

The brief concluding chapter, aside from reviewing the study's findings, will discuss what this example teaches about the value of hermeneutics for Jewish intellectual history. Applying those lessons to other studies could take an important step to revealing the factors that drive change in the ways Jews think about their sacred texts, their religion, and their God.

CHAPTER ONE: TREATING AVOT AS BIBLE

Since “midrashic” readings of Avot—those that use techniques ordinarily restricted to the study of Bible-- are the topic of this study, we must begin by showing that haYizhari, Hayyun, and Abarbanel offer such readings. Only after that will it be worth our while to examine earlier and later commentaries to assess the significance of this contribution to the history of Avot interpretation.

REINTERPRETING LETTERS—VAV AND MEM

For the sake of order, we will begin with the smallest unit of the Hebrew language that commentators could focus on in reading a new meaning into the text, letters. Ordinarily, letters just contribute to the meaning of a larger word, so that commentators could not suggest an alternate meaning for that letter. When the letters *vav* and *mem* are written as prefixes to a word, however, they have an independent meaning—*vav* usually serving the role of “and” and *mem* as a comparative.

The *vav* and *mem* could, however, perform other grammatical functions. One technique of Biblical exegesis was to question whether these letters served other purposes, as we saw in the introduction. Despite a centuries-old consensus as to the function of these letters in Avot, we find our exegetes sometimes reinterpreting them, in a way that recasts the Mishnah in question.

In one case, Shammai’s aphorism orders people to make Torah (study) a fixed part of life, to say little and do much, and to greet everyone with a pleasant countenance. In the usual reading, the “and” of the last clause (the *vav* of the word **וְהָיָה** in **וְהָיָה אִתְּךָ לְכָל הָאָדָם בְּסָבֵר פְּנִים יְפֹתִים**, the “and” in “and greet each person with a pleasant countenance”) connects the third phrase to the first two. Along with making Torah study a fixed part of our lives, doing little and saying much, Shammai wants Jews to greet people nicely.

Abarbanel instead assumes that this *vav* serves another of its grammatical roles, that of implying the result to an if-then statement. Reading the *vav* that way changes the Mishnah to read, “if you make Torah a fixed part of your life and say little and do much, *then* (the *vav*) you will greet everyone pleasantly.”¹

*Midrash Shemuel*² cites a similar textual rendering in haYizhari’s name,³ this one on the Mishnah that quotes Antignos of Sokho. After telling his listeners to serve God without any thought of reward, Antignos added “**מִוְרָא שָׁמַיִם עָלֵיכֶם וַיְהִי**,” most simply translated “and let the fear of Heaven be upon you.” HaYizhari says instead that *if* one serves God without making that service dependent on reward, *then* that person will achieve fear of God. Again, a *vav* that was generally understood to link two phrases was instead read as the apodosis of an if-then expression.

In each case, the reading suggested runs against the uniform understanding of the structure of the phrase among earlier medieval commentators. In addition, both readings, despite being grammatically possible, share a weakness that makes them less than compelling. The words **וְהָיָה** and **וַיְהִי** are both commands, “be!” and “let [the fear of Heaven] be” respectively, not a description, “you will be” or “it will be”.

¹ P. 78.

² 1:3, p. 20.

³ It does not appear in the Houghton MS of the commentary, nor in the transcription of that section of the commentary that Shmidman adds as an appendix to his dissertation, *The Abot Commentary of R. Joseph ibn Shoshan and Medieval Commentaries on Abot*. While that hinders any assertion that haYizhari certainly offered this interpretation, Uceda’s citing it in haYizhari’s name at least means that he was seen as the source of these kinds of interpretations.

To convey the meaning these interpreters suggest, the Mishnayot should have used words that are not commands, such as **וְתִהְיֶה**; in the first Mishnah, that would have meant “and you *will* (as a prediction) greet all people with a smiling countenance”, and, in the second, **וְתִהְיֶה מוֹרָא שָׁמַיִם עֲלֵיכֶם**, and the fear of God *will be* (as a prediction) upon you. The exegetical technique is thus particularly worth noting, since it favors innovative readings above fidelity to the most likely meaning.

The letter *mem* also created opportunities for new readings. When *mem* appears at the beginning of a word, it usually means “from,” so that the word **מִסִּינִי** in the first phrase of the tractate (**מִשֵּׁה קִבֵּל תּוֹרָה מִסִּינִי**, Moses received the Torah from Sinai) most simply means “from Sinai,” presumably naming the place where the Torah was given. In Scripture, though, a *mem* can also mean “as a result of,” as Abarbanel proves.⁴

Even before we see how he applied this insight to Avot, we should note Abarbanel’s equating Biblical and Mishnaic Hebrew.⁵ While he may have been making a purely linguistic claim about the letter *mem*, seeing Abarbanel also interpret Avot as he would Scripture suggests that he identified the two more fully than just linguistics.

Abarbanel’s reading the *mem* as causative helps him explain the Mishnah’s omission of who (or Who) gave the Torah to Moses at Sinai. By saying it was **מִסִּינִי**, he claims, the Mishnah meant to draw attention to the role of Sinai in the event. Moses, in Abarbanel’s reading, underwent fundamental changes at Sinai, ones that allowed him to absorb the entirety of the Torah in the short time he was on the mountaintop. In saying Moses received the Torah **מִסִּינִי**, the Mishnah informed readers that he was able to receive the Torah *as a result of what happened* at Sinai.

Abarbanel reads a *mem* similarly when he encounters R. Ya’aqov’s declaration that an hour spent in repentance and good deeds is **יִפְהָ מְכַל חַיֵּי הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא**, better than all of life in the World to Come.” Since Abarbanel envisions the World to Come as the most perfect state for human beings, the suggestion that this world could be “better than” that world in any way bothers him.

He therefore again reads the *mem* as indicating a cause, that the awareness of the World to Come will improve one’s repentance and good deeds. In that view, the Mishnah meant to declare that repentance and good deeds are better (**יִפְהָ**) when they are performed *because of* (**מְכַל**) a person’s focus on the World to Come (**חַיֵּי הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא**).⁶ One who performs good deeds (or repents) in order to be a well-accepted member of the community, for example, would not be on as high a level—as far as this Mishnah is concerned—as one who does so in order to earn a share in the World to Come.

⁴ P. 45, where he notes that this would be the **מִן הַסִּבָּה**, the explanatory *mem*. He cites Job 4:9, **מִנְשַׁמַּת אֱלֹהִים יָאֲבֹדוּ**, they will die from the breath of the Lord (in Abarbanel’s reading, *because of the breath...*) and Genesis 24:50, **מֵהָ יֵצֵא הַדְּבָר**, the matter has emanated from God (or, it is because of God that the matter has come out this way). Abarbanel’s reading of those Scriptural verses is also open to debate.

⁵ That the two languages were distinct has been long recognized. See L. Sainz-Badillo, *History of the Hebrew Language*, trans. J. Elwolde (Cambridge U. Press: Cambridge, 1993) and H. Magid, **תּוֹלְדוֹת לְשׁוֹנֵנוּ**, *History of Our Language* (Tel Aviv, 1984). In particular, see Magid, p. 85, who notes that *Avodah Zara* 58b explicitly distinguishes the language of the Torah from the language of the Rabbis. For specific discussion of Avot’s language as Biblical or Mishnaic, see Sharvit, S. **מִסְכַּת אֲבוֹת וְלִשׁוֹנָהּ**, *The Versions and Language of Tractate Avot* (PhD Diss.: Bar-Ilan, 1976).

⁶ 4:17, on p. 260. There, in addition to Job 4:9, Abarbanel cites Psalms 37:23, **מֵהָ מְצַעְדֵי גִבֹּר כּוֹנֵנוּ**, which would ordinarily mean that God arranges a man’s footsteps. Abarbanel’s reading changes that to “a man’s footsteps are arranged *because of* God,” ridding him of the problematic issues of Divine control over human action. On p. 218, Abarbanel also refers to such a *mem*; his calling it **מִן הַפּוֹעֵל** might mislead us, but his prooftexts confirm that it is the same grammatical claim.

Note that the word **כָּל** (all) does not quite fit Abarbanel’s interpretation, since there is no reason that repentance will be better if performed out of recognition of *the entire* World to Come as opposed to just recognition of the World to Come.

Hayyun offers one similar *mem* interpretation, and uses the word מן the same way. In the fourth chapter, R. Yonatan announces that one who fulfills the Torah מעוני, usually read as “in poverty” will merit fulfilling it מעושר, when wealthy. On the other hand, one who neglects Torah מעושר will end up neglecting it while impoverished.

Hayyun, however, reads מעושר as meaning *because of* one’s wealth. R. Yonatan does not mean to threaten that all wealthy people will become destitute for failing to fulfill the Torah, just those for whom their wealth itself interfered with their religious observance. Those people—the ones who neglect study *because of* their wealth—will lose that wealth as punishment for their religious failings.⁷

Hayyun’s reading implicitly explains why the statement, as understood by medieval commentators, does not match reality. Since the Mishnah did not mean that all wealthy people who neglect Torah would lose their money, the reality that many spiritually impoverished people stay rich all their lives ceases to be a problem for this text. In addition, his construction of the phrase lets him make a point about letting wealth or poverty interfere with one’s observance. Finally, most important for our purposes, it precedes Abarbanel exegetically in assuming that a *mem* was causative rather than descriptive.

The word מן is grammatically close to the prefix *mem*, we could often substitute one for another. Hayyun’s similar reading of the words “אל תתיאש מן הפורענות,” do not despair of punishment,” is therefore worth mentioning. The warning appears right after clauses that advise readers to distance themselves from an evil neighbor and to avoid friendly connections with evildoers. In context, the reminder of punishment seems to most likely mean that people who are tempted to join forces with such evildoers should not be lulled into thinking that such evil people will never get their deserved punishment. By not giving up hope, or at least awareness, that evildoers will eventually get punished, readers of this Mishnah will remember to avoid contact and connection with such people.

Hayyun accepts that interpretation and several others.⁸ The last of his interpretations sees the statement as meaning that people should never fall into despair *as a result of* punishment (do not despair מן—because of—הפורענות, punishment). In this interpretation, it is not *lack* of punishment that might cause despair, but its presence. Aside from the poignancy of the comment, which suggests a time of trouble for the commentator and his readers, it again reads a *mem*, or its grammatical equivalent, as indicating a cause, a possibility not considered by four hundred years of Avot commentators.

The letter interpretations provide a good introduction to the innovative exegesis and Scriptural context we can expect to find in these commentaries. Moving on to larger grammatical units will only fortify our characterization of haYizhari, Hayyun, and Abarbanel’s work.

RETHINKING WORDS, GROUPINGS AND MEANINGS

Aside from letters, haYizhari, Hayyun, and Abarbanel also occasionally challenge the conventional meaning of words, either by assuming that they play a different role in a phrase from what was usually assumed, or simply by asserting a different meaning than previously used.

R. Yishma’el’s prohibition of being דן יחיד was ordinarily read as “judging alone” (as opposed to assembling a court of 3). Hayyun instead saw it as meaning not to judge a single person, but to make sure that the other litigant was present at all phases of the case.

Had the Mishnah wanted to indicate that meaning, though, it should have avoided the ambiguity by using a clearer locution, such as דן את היחיד. Hayyun thus assumes that R. Yishma’el

⁷ Hayyun, 4:11, p. 205.

⁸ Hayyun, 1:7, 91. Multiplicity of interpretation is also a phenomenon we have not seen before, and will discuss later in the chapter.

left out the word **את** and the letter **ה** at the beginning of the word **יחיד** that would have made his message more clear.

Later in the same chapter, we find the warning to value the honor of students and friends,⁹ presumably calling for a higher level of honor than their teachers and friends would have offered on their own. Hayyun, however, reads the phrase **כבוד חברך**, the honor of your friend, (and, similarly, **כבוד תלמידך**, your student's honor) as the honor that *others* give to your friend or student.

Instead of discussing how to treat one's students and friends, the Mishnah is talking about how vigorously to protect students and friends from improper treatment at the hands of others. Here, too, Hayyun is assuming that the Mishnah leaves important clarifying words implicit. The comment itself, as before, interests us less than his having recast the phrase so as to change its meaning from that assumed by all earlier medieval commentary.¹⁰

Abarbanel's reading of R. Aqiva's statement **נידון העולם**-- previously uniformly understood as "and the world is judged for the good (i.e. leniently),"-- is even more striking.¹¹ The usual reading sees the statement as explaining how humans, who would certainly be found guilty if God judged according to the letter of the law, continue to survive.¹² The words **נידון העולם** were taken as a unit, so that the Hebrew reads "and with good (benevolence), the world is judged."

Abarbanel instead groups the first two words together, reading the phrase as "**ובטוב העולם**," properly translated as "in [their benefiting from] the goodness of the world, [people] are judged."¹³ In *that* reading, the Mishnah echoes the traditional Jewish view that a pleasant life sometimes reflects God's negative judgement. Since the evildoers' enjoyment of this world uses up their reward for their merits, they then receive only punishment in the World to Come.¹⁴

Midrash Shemuel cites a comment of haYizhari's with the same exegetical underpinnings. A statement recorded in the second chapter contrasts the consequences of excessive acquisition of this-worldly items with the rewards of extraordinary¹⁵ involvement in worthy acts. One who accumulates excessive flesh, for example, really only leads to more worms eating his body after his death, as opposed to one who donates a great deal of money to charity, who creates great peace.

The end of that Mishnah switches from using the verb **מרכבה**, one who accumulates much of something (flesh, acts of charity, etc.), to **קנה**, one who acquires. This leads to the statement "**קנה שם**," which most simply means

one who acquires a good name has acquired for himself [has made a lasting acquisition that inheres in himself, as opposed to possessions which are fleeting and not connected to a person's essence]; one who has acquired words of Torah has acquired life in the World to Come.

⁹ 2:10, s.v. **יהי כבוד חברך**.

¹⁰ For interesting related examples in Hayyun, see 3:20, 177, that **שבו נברא העולם** means for its sake, the World was created, instead of the more common, "with it," meaning using it as a tool. On that, see haYizhari as well, Houghton 61, 34b, Shmidman, p. 322. Hayyun, 4:9, 200, sees **פורק ממנו איבה**, removes hatred from himself, as **פורק מעצמו**, an internal removal (he will not hate anyone), where most commentators had read it as meaning that others will not hate him. In 4:16, 211, Hayyun sees **שגגת תלמוד**, as errors because of lack of study, not errors within one's study.

¹¹ 3:15.

¹² This reading also fits well with the rest of the Mishnah, which says that "everything is viewed, and permission is given."

¹³ p. 98.

¹⁴ Like Hayyun, Abarbanel's reading assumes that the Mishnah left important material unstated, in this case the subject of the clause. On purely exegetical grounds, this may be a flaw, but it does not render the readings grammatically impossible.

¹⁵ The Hebrew uses the same word for both halves, **מרכבה**. It is, then, comparing one who goes far beyond the ordinary in acquisition of worldly items to one who goes far beyond the ordinary in performing worthy acts.

Read that way, we have two clauses adding unstartling information to what had come before. HaYizhari, however,¹⁶ runs the clauses together, so that the four קנה phrases should be translated as if one has acquired a good name for himself [meaning, as a true acquisition, not a false good name], then he will have also acquired words of Torah and life in the World to Come.

The statement now makes the revolutionary claim that a true acquisition of a good name, which could happen in several ways, will necessarily lead to also acquiring words of Torah and life in the World to Come.

Of course, this re-grouping—which classical Midrash often did with Biblical texts-- comes at cost to another ideal in reading the Bible, finding significance in each part of a statement. In addition to combining two if-then phrases into one long one, haYizhari ignores two extra appearances of the word קנה. In his reading, the Mishnah could have written “קנה שם טוב לעצמו קנה לו דברי תורה וחיי” “העולם הבא, one who acquired a good name truly for himself has acquired words of Torah and life in the World to Come.”

Nonetheless, his reading is similar to the others we have cited here in reconfiguring previously unchallenged phrase groupings. The roughness of the interpretation was not as much the point as the ability to find new meaning in the old text.

Most manuscripts of the Mishnah were unpunctuated, giving no firm evidence of the “proper” grouping of words in the text, so there is no compelling argument to be made against this exegetical technique-- no one could prove that the Mishnah meant what commentators prior to haYizhari, Hayyun and Abarbanel had assumed. At the same time, questioning the grammatical construction of phrases allows for considerable change in the commonly understood subject of the Mishnah. It is a radical move, although one that cannot be rejected on any specific grammatical grounds.

REDEFINING WORDS

In defining words differently from the ways assumed by previous Avot commentators, haYizhari, Hayyun, and Abarbanel, go even further than we have seen until now, bending exegesis almost to its breaking point (or perhaps beyond, depending on one’s point of view). HaYizhari offers numerous examples of an interest in words and their possible definitions, only a few of which we can record here.

The word ערוה ordinarily means sexual impropriety, but haYizhari instead reads it as “anything that should be covered and is instead revealed,” offering as a parallel the word ערו from Psalms 137:7 (which has the same first three letters, and could therefore possibly have the same root as ערוה).¹⁷ The word בנים, sons or children, is usually seen as stemming from the word for building; in the context of R. Aqiva’s assertion that Jews are בנים למקום, haYizhari suggests instead that the word should be related to understanding, indicating that the Jews are those prepared to truly understand God.

Abarbanel, too, redefines words, such as the word שלום, peace, which Hillel urges Jews to pursue, as part of making themselves students of the Biblical Aaron. Earlier sources saw Aaron’s pursuit of peace expressed in his resolving arguments, meaning peace was the absence of argument or hostility.

Abarbanel instead construes the word שלום (peace) as finding common good, agreement among people, building their love for one another, and forging a healthy society or group. It is in that sense, he says, that Scripture refers to שלום אחיך and שלום הצאן, the peace of your brothers and

¹⁶ 2:8, 110, Houghton 61, p. 17a.

¹⁷ Houghton 61, 32a, also in M. Shmidman, “An Excerpt from the Avot Commentary of R. Mattathias haYizhari,” *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, ed. I. Twersky, (Harvard U. Press: Cambridge, 1979), p. 317. HaYizhari’s reading of the verse is also not completely compelling, but that is not our concern here.

the peace of the sheep, phrases that are hard to interpret given the ordinary meaning of the word peace.¹⁸ As general well being, though, the word fits well.

Without arguing with Abarbanel's reading of those verses, he has made a significant jump in reading *shalom* that way in this statement. The Biblical phrases use *shalom* as a reference to general well-being in a context when cessation of arguments was not a feasible possibility. In Avot, however, the ordinary meaning of the word worked perfectly well. Abarbanel's drawing a broader lesson based on a secondary meaning of *shalom*, that Aaron forged the kind of social peace found in a society that works towards shared goals in harmony, reads Avot as a Biblical phrase when there was no internal pressure to do so.¹⁹

In other examples, Abarbanel adopts haYizhari's view of the meaning of ערוה, saying that it therefore refers to sin generally, since sin consists of actions that ought to be hidden from people, but are improperly made part of their world. He sees חלק--a share or portion--as referring to the soul. When Ben Zoma asserts that true wealth involves being שמח בחלקו, Abarbanel sees it as meaning a person who is happy with his or her own soul, not, as the common interpretation has it, one who is happy with his or her lot in life.²⁰

Just to keep track of how significantly the exegetical changes affect the meaning of Avot, we can note that Abarbanel has not only changed the specific meaning of the phrase, but the subject matter of the declaration. Ben Zoma is no longer talking about being happy with one's physical or economic lot in life, but about each person accepting the pool of talents and character traits with which he has been endowed.²¹

Since haYizhari and Abarbanel were positing another meaning for these words, not denying the usual one, they were engaging in a classic *midrashic* practice, finding new layers of meanings in texts that were already perfectly comprehensible. In addition, their use of Scripture to support their readings alerts us to that focus.

CHANGING THE WORD IN THE TEXT

The most startling technique we will find, changing the actual word of a Mishnah, appears rarely, but at least once in each of our commentators. For haYizhari, it happens when the Mishnah lists ten objects created at twilight on the Sixth Day of Creation. Among them, the Mishnah lists the מכתב, a somewhat ambiguous term generally taken to mean the script used to write the Ten Commandments on the tablets given to Moses at Sinai.

HaYizhari instead reads it instead as a homograph of the original word, one that means the instrument used to write on the Tablets.²² The interpretation itself appeared in earlier sources, but haYizhari's care in noting how to repoint the word to get to that reading seems new.

Abarbanel repoints a different word, in Avtalyon's obscure warning that teachers should be careful with their words, lest they be "exiled to a place of bad waters." Students may then drink of these waters and die, creating a desecration of the Name of God.²³

¹⁸ Genesis 37:14, where Jacob is sending Joseph to find out about his brothers.

¹⁹ P. 74. Abarbanel's political bent might have attuned him to the different kinds of peace a leader can forge.

²⁰ P. 218. Abarbanel cites Lamentations 3:24 and Psalms 119:57 to support his reading.

²¹ Abarbanel reads נסיון, the word used to refer to the ten times God "tested" Abraham, as actually meaning a demonstration for others. The Mishnah then means that God used Abraham ten times to prove to others the depth of Abraham's belief in God, with no element of a test to it, p. 309. Maimonides defines the word this way as well in *Guide* III;24, but Abarbanel cites only Scripture, emphasizing for us his use of Biblical Hebrew to condition his reading of Avot.

²² Cited in *Midrash Shemuel*, 5:5, p. 372, Houghton 61, 63b. Rashi, *Pesahim* 54a, offers the same reading, since he cannot find plausible distinct meanings for כתב, writing, and מכתב, also writing.

²³ 1:11.

The Mishnah cannot be read literally, since it relates unrelated phenomena—insufficiently careful speech, exile, bad waters, and desecration of God’s Name. Commentators were all forced into metaphoric interpretation, at least to some extent. A simple example is the tendency to translate מים הרעים, bad waters, as heresy; since water is often a metaphor for Torah, heresy would qualify as bad waters.

Prior to Abarbanel, the word ותגלו that follows the phrase “שמא תחובו חובת גלות” lest you become liable for exile” was also taken as referring to exile, so that the phrase read “ ותגלו למקום מים הרעים, and you will be exiled to a place of bad waters.” Abarbanel instead assumed that the word should be read as *U-TeGaLU*, you will reveal, in which case this phrase refers to a new circumstance, that the person who is exiled will reveal an undefined something to “the place of bad waters.”²⁴

To explain, Abarbanel says that Avtalyon means that one *already in exile* needs to be careful with his words, lest he reveal esoteric knowledge to the unworthy, leading to desecration of the Divine Name. In addition to the interest we have in the comment because it was written by an exile—did Abarbanel worry about revealing esoteric knowledge in a new milieu?—we also are struck by how he here actually changed the Mishnah’s wording.

Hayyun’s example of changing a word goes farther than either of the other two, in that he openly reads one word for another, much like the אל תקרי *derash* we spoke of in the introduction. When the Mishnah says עשה לך רב, uniformly read as “make for yourself a teacher,” Hayyun instead interprets it as עשה עצמך רב, make yourself a teacher.²⁵

THE BEGINNING OF MULTIPLE MEANINGS

Our three commentators also treat Avot like a Biblical text in their willingness to entertain multiple, even incompatible, interpretations. The most dramatic examples come from Abarbanel, such as in a Mishnah we mentioned previously, Antigonus of Sokho’s call to worship God without any thought of reward.

Antigonus used the word פרס (*peras*) to mean reward, when he might have used the word שכר (*sakhar*). Antigonus’ claim bothered Abarbanel, since he believed (both naturally and based on his reading of several Talmudic statements) that it was perfectly acceptable to worship God for the sake of the rewards He promised.

Abarbanel’s first solution distinguished פרס from שכר, with the former being physical reward and the latter the noncorporeal reward of the World to Come.²⁶ Abarbanel noted that Antigonus only prohibited worshiping God for the sake of physical reward, but said nothing about one who worshiped out of a desire to secure the World to Come.²⁷

Abarbanel’s second explanation points to God’s great and continuing kindnesses to human beings as the reason we cannot seek future reward for our service to Him; the obligation stems from what He has already given us, not what He will give in the future. The rewards that God offers-- and the Talmudic statements that allow one to worship God for those rewards-- were all meant only to help people live up to an obligation that exists even without those rewards.

²⁴ P. 73-4.

²⁵ 1:16, 106.

²⁶ Abarbanel seems to simply assume that פרס means physical reward. For שכר, he notes some sources in which it means physical or monetary reward (as in Genesis 30:16, where Leah tells Jacob that she has hired him with her sons’ flowers), but others where it refers to future reward, as in Jeremiah 31:15, *Erwin* 21a, and *Hullin* 142a.

²⁷ P. 56.

In this interpretation, Abarbanel retains the simple meaning of **פרס** and **שכר**, with no distinction between physical and nonphysical rewards. He only explains why his original assertion allowing worship for the sake of reward was in error.²⁸

The two interpretations assume opposing and incompatible views of an important religious issue—whether or not one may, as an ideal form of religious experience, serve God in order to achieve the reward of the World to Come. Abarbanel's willingness to entertain both possibilities, without firmly deciding in favor of one, suggests that he was more interested in investigating all exegetical possibilities than taking a consistent philosophical stand.²⁹

In a slightly less stark example of the same phenomenon, Abarbanel offered two readings of R. Tarfon's statement that **"לא עליך המלאכה לגמור"**, the work is not for you to complete.³⁰ While he clearly understood work to mean some kind of religious effort, Abarbanel was comfortable suggesting first that it meant only Torah study, a relatively narrow definition of the work intended, and then that it meant commandments generally, a broader one.

The multiple readings are particularly noteworthy in Abarbanel, who posits an overall structure to each chapter. That is, he assumes not only that each Mishnah connects to the ones before and after it, but that each chapter revolves around a single central theme. Abarbanel's offering readings that do not fit that topical structure are particularly noteworthy, since it seems to show that his commitment to multiple readings outweighed his interest in a cohesive reading of the entire chapter.

The innovative exegesis and multiple readings suggest that these commentators saw the validity in each of several approaches to the same text. Their goal was not to identify the single meaning of the text, but to uncover new meanings for each text within the rules of reading they considered reasonable. Like their focus on letters and words, this, too, is best characterized as Biblical or midrashic.

THE EFFECTS OF THE ASSUMPTION OF STRUCTURE

Abarbanel's structural conception, once mentioned, is worth elaborating. Early in the first chapter, the Mishnah records Shimon b. Shetah's assertion that Torah, **עבודה** (which means service, usually taken as either sacrifices or prayer), and **גמילות חסדים** (acts of kindness) are the underpinnings of Creation.³¹ Abarbanel assumes those three types of activity are the subject of the rest of the chapter, so he interprets all the rabbis quoted thereafter as either elaborating one of the three or as reacting to previous claims about their meaning and performance.³²

Along the same lines, he sees the second chapter as analyzing whether innate intellect, Torah, or the two together provide the best guide to a proper life path. The third chapter records various views of how best to avoid evil.³³ Finally, the fourth chapter investigates whether actions or

²⁸ P. 58.

²⁹ For other examples of Abarbanel offering sharply different possibilities, see pp. 84-5 (on the definition of the silence that R. Shimon b. Gamliel declares good for the body), 133-35 (on the definition of the three kinds of thoughts that protect a person from sin), and 363-8, where he offers different options for Judah b. Tema's adjuration to adopt the characteristics of various animals as part of one's worship of God.

³⁰ 2:16, p. 127.

³¹ 1:2.

³² See for example, 1:3, p. 53, where he says that Antigonus expands on the **עבודה** clause, Yose ben Yoezer the Torah clause, and Yose b. Yohanan addresses the issue of **גמילות חסדים**. Later rabbis (see p. 65, where he views Yehoshua b. Perahya as amending Yose b. Yoezer and Nitai of Arbel as limiting Yose b. Yohanan), were reacting to those who came before. Most clearly, see his summary of the chapter on p. 89 (the very end of the chapter), where he reviews all the statements and their connection to R. Shimon b. Shetah's original view. Note also that on the same page, in the beginning of the second chapter, Abarbanel again recognizes his originality in these assumptions.

³³ P. 133.

intellectual endeavors lead most surely to perfection,³⁴ which rounds out, in his view, the tractate's discussion of a complete religious life.

Abarbanel also assumed—as had others before him, but with less surprising exegetical impact-- that each Mishnah was connected to the one just before it. For example, the second chapter spends a few paragraphs on R. Yohanan b. Zakkai and his five star students. In those paragraphs, R. Yohanan positively characterizes each, which Abarbanel sees as their most noteworthy trait.

In the next paragraph, R. Yohanan asks each of them to identify a principle or character trait whose adoption guides one to the good in life, and then, separately, a guiding principle or character trait best avoided. Abarbanel links the character traits for which each student was praised with the path that student promoted.³⁵

That assumption runs into difficulty in the case of R. Eliezer b. Hyrkanos, whom R. Yohanan had praised as a **בור סיד שאינו מאבד טיפה**, a well-lined pit that does not lose a drop, meaning that he had a remarkable memory. A good memory does not obviously relate to R. Eliezer's suggestion of an “**עין טובה**,” literally a good eye, as the **מדה טובה**, the guiding principle, for a person to adopt.

Other commentators had seen the phrase as meaning generosity or a goodness of spirit that allows a person to joyfully celebrate the successes of others. Neither of those has anything to do with a good memory, but those commentators were not invested in finding a connection between the trait that R. Yohanan b. Zakkai had praised and the guiding principle that that person enunciated.

Abarbanel says that memory involves maintaining one's learning before one's eyes, along the lines of the Scriptural verse **ואשימה עיני עליו**.³⁶ Supported by Scripture, at least in his view, he can then say that R. Eliezer's **עין טובה** actually means a good memory, since the good eye will keep matters well enough in mind to remember them. Whether or not we accept Abarbanel's interpretation, it clearly was offered to maintain the connection between R. Eliezer's central trait and his proposal for a path to follow.³⁷

Few of Abarbanel's successors adopt his attempt to structure entire chapters, suggesting that they were not impressed with the idea.³⁸ For us, it shows another way in which Abarbanel treated Avot as a **ספר אחיד**, a cohesive whole, an assumption that Midrash made about Scripture, as we saw in the introduction.

³⁴ See p. 212, where he defines the chapter as a question of the balance between **מעשה**, action, and **עיון**, study. On p. 222, he understands Ben `Azzai as stressing actions over study. While he does not decide which path the chapter prefers, on p. 353 he defines a **חסיד**, a particularly pious person, as one who combines knowledge with performance of the commandments, so that **מעשה** garnered at least some place in his view.

³⁵ P. 114. Note that the assumption itself is not forced by the text or by psychology; often, people stress those areas in which they do *not* excel as the most important to work on. See also p. 145, where Abarbanel explains why R. Halafta's belief about ten who are studying Torah together appears in the third chapter, rather than in the fifth with the other numerical Mishnayot. On pp. 333 and 337, Abarbanel connects the discussions of **חכם** (a wise person), **גולם** (the opposite), and seven types of punishment to his own innovative view of the ten items created at twilight on the Sixth Day of Creation, p. 330.

³⁶ Genesis 44:21, where Judah reminds Joseph of his insistence on seeing Benjamin. Note that Abarbanel's reading of the verse is open to challenge, as it could simply meaning, “that I may see him.”

³⁷ And, as we have so often noted, used Scriptural support for its claim.

³⁸ One interesting exception is R. Obadiah Sforno (best known for his Bible commentary), an Italian rabbi who was almost forty years younger than Abarbanel. Although he does not credit Abarbanel, the connection seems too clear not to suggest influence. We will also mention chapter structure in our discussion of R. Moses Almosnino, below.

HaYizhari did not treat Avot this way, but he did interpret Scripture as interconnected.³⁹ In his commentary on the eightfold acrostic Psalms 119, haYizhari assumes that each group of eight verses, all of which start with the same letter, discusses a single topic.⁴⁰

The various ways these commentators arrived at new and multiple meanings of texts are only historically striking if they depart from earlier assumptions. Having grounded ourselves in haYizhari, Hayyun, and Abarbanel's exegesis, we can now compare it to that of earlier commentaries. Once we show how different they were, we can then turn to gauging whether their novelty had lasting impact, and from there to consider the origins of that hermeneutic shift.

³⁹ HaYizhari also pointed out the interconnection among ideas mentioned in the Mishnah, but not the Mishnayot themselves. See, for example, pp. 3a and 3b in the Houghton MS, where he asserts that both the 3 statements of the Men of the Great Assembly and the three elements upon which Simeon the Just thought the world stood were internally interconnected.

⁴⁰ As Rappel points out in his introduction, pp. 21-22.

CHAPTER TWO: *PESHAT AVOT*: AVOT COMMENTARY BEFORE AND DURING THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

The implicit claim that earlier commentators had *not* read Avot in the same way as haYizhari, Hayyun, and Abarbanel is crucial to the assertion of their innovativeness. Commentaries from three different eras will help us prove the point.

First, we will briefly discuss Talmudic Avot commentary, because there is so little of it. Second, and more extensively, we will examine a representative sampling of medieval Avot commentary. Finally, we will look at the commentary of R. Joseph Yavets, written just about contemporaneously with Abarbanel's, to show that even late in the fifteenth century, the new form of exegesis had not yet become as influential as in the sixteenth.

AVOT DE-RABI NATAN—FIRST STEPS

Two pre-medieval texts included interpretations of Avot, *Avot de-Rabi Natan*, a collection of Mishnaic material on Avot, and the Talmud itself. In both cases, though, interpretation (of any sort) was not the central concern.¹

Talmudic comments generally simply cited Avot, taking the text's meaning for granted.² *Avot de-Rabi Natan* came closer to commentary; many of its statements do interpret the text. Some of those interpretations prefigure the fifteenth century comments we have seen, reading a meaning into the text that the words themselves do not support.

For a prime example, we can take *Avot de-Rabi Natan's* reading of ויהיו עניים בני ביתך, let the poor be [like] members of your household:

“it does not mean poor literally, but one who is humble, and his wife is humble, and his children and the members of his household are humble, even his dogs do not cause damage.”³

¹ M. Kister, *Studies in Aboth de-Rabi Nathan: Text, Redaction, and Interpretation* (Hebrew U.: Jerusalem, 1998), p. 15, assumes that Avot de-Rabi Natan expands rather than explains Avot. Later, pp. 117-122, he notes that there is more of a tendency to interpret in those parts of Avot de-Rabbi Natan that refer to the first part of Avot (meaning the first two chapters), and to expand in the second part. Even that distinction, however, is less clear in Version A. On page 136, he concurs with J. Goldin, *Studies in Midrash and Related Literature*, NY 1988, p. 104, who noted the midrashic quality of even the interpretive parts of Avot de-Rabi Natan.

² As mentioned in the introduction, verified by perusing Kobrin's *מסכת אבות עם בבלי וירושלמי*, The Tractate Avot with Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds.

³ Version B, Chapter 14. In Hebrew, going from עני, poor, to ענו, humble, involves changing the last letter of the word from a *yud* into a *vav*; those two letters are written similarly-- the *yud* extends from the top of the line a little bit of the way down, while the *vav* extends all the way down--so that the change is fairly minimal.

Kister, p. 153, mentions this text, and claims the words were close in meaning as well as in how they were written in the times of the Mishnah, since the poor were more likely to be humble. He also suggests that Version B might have intended both meanings at the same time, that by inculcating humility in the members of one's household, the poor will tend to be willing to join that household as well.

Medieval commentators generally understood עניים, poor people, to be the subject of the sentence, which then calls for the reader to welcome such people as if they were members of the household. *Avot de-Rabi Natan* changes two important aspects of the phrase. First, the word עני becomes ענו, humble, a “reading in” move similar to the midrashic אל תקרי we saw in the introduction. Even if that were the only change, the statement would now be calling on readers to make the *humble* part of the household, not the poor.

Second, *Avot de-Rabi Natan* identifies the members of the household as the subject of the sentence, not the poor, as is usually assumed. Instead of discussing how to treat outsiders, the statement now warns the reader to foster humility among his own household members. This re-visioning of the grammatical elements of a phrase is exactly what we found in the previous chapter—perhaps more extreme—and will find again in the commentaries that came after Abarbanel.

An example that stays closer to the plain contextual meaning of Avot occurs when the Mishnah mentions a series of tens—tests that Abraham passed, plagues in Egypt, sins in the desert that God ignored before decreeing forty years of wandering. *Avot de-Rabi Natan* assumes that the first of those tens (Abraham’s tests) created a lasting bank of goodwill that made the later ones (the plagues and the forbearance before punishment in the desert) possible. In that reading, the tests were a structuring vehicle for Biblical Jewish history, not just Avot.

Yet such readings are not the rule. More commonly, the work offers unusual but reasonable definitions of words,⁴ expansions of a particular statement,⁵ or completely new material that is similar to, but not the same as, what appeared in Avot itself.⁶ Regardless of how much emphasis we would place on the various elements of *Avot de-Rabi Natan*, we need to remember that medieval commentators did not pick up on that aspect of the work. If *Avot de-Rabi Natan* intended to open up Avot to Biblical or midrashic “readings in,” it failed until the fifteenth century.

MEDIEVAL AVOT COMMENTARIES—A REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE

Before we can discuss medieval Avot commentary, we need to decide which commentaries to examine, since there were dozens of such commentaries written prior to Abarbanel’s completion of *Nahalat Avot* in 1497.⁷ Instead of examining them all, we have tried to identify those that were influential.

The widely used commentary of R. Obadiah Bertinoro suggests four other works to study carefully. Bertinoro wrote around the same time as Abarbanel, completing his explanation of the entire Mishnah sometime after moving to Palestine in 1488.⁸ His concise explanations of the text became the standard commentary printed in later editions of the Mishnah.⁹

⁴ See Version B, Chapter 16, where the Mishnah’s warning not to attach oneself to a רשע, an evildoer, was taken as a reference to the יצר הרע, the evil inclination. Note that *Avot de-Rabi Natan* does not claim that the word *means* that, so it could be a sort of midrashic reading in. Even that technique is infrequent in *Avot de-Rabi Natan* as a whole.

⁵ For some examples, see Version A, Chapter 13, which shows how Abraham and God qualify as having said little but done much, with Efron as a counterexample; 1:16, expands on how to control one’s evil inclination; 2:30, which offers more ways for how to consider one’s actions as part of one’s service of God, turning them into a *mitsvah* (such as Hillel’s using the bathroom in order to ready his body for service of God); and 1:24 and 2:35, with more of Elisha b. Avuyah’s statements than those found in Avot.

⁶ See especially the end of Version B, which lists other phenomena that fit the numbers 4, 7, and 10 than those cited in Avot itself.

⁷ For a by-no-means exhaustive list of pre-seventeenth century Avot commentaries, see J. Cohen, “מסכת ,פירושיה ותרומתה באספקלריאת הדורות אבות, *Tractate Avot, Its Commentaries and Translations in the Course of Generations*” *Kiryat Sefer* (1965), pp. 104-110. *Midrash Shemuel*, supplies the names of numerous other commentaries, many either lost or still in manuscript.

⁸ Bertinoro has received little scholarly attention, aside from Louis Ginzberg’s entry in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, reproduced at www.JewishEncyclopedia.com, and I. Lerner, ר' עובדיה מברטנורו: חייו ותרומתו לפירוש

CHAPTER TWO: PESHAT AVOT: AVOT COMMENTARY BEFORE AND DURING
THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY²⁹

For Bertinoro, concision and originality were apparently incompatible. His commentary takes the bulk of its ideas from four predecessors, Rashi,¹⁰ Maimonides, R. Yonah, and R. Simon b. Zemah Duran. Each of those was a major Jewish thinker independent of his work on Avot, so their thoughts on the tractate would be interesting to historians in any case.

Bertinoro's reliance on them adds to their importance, as does the similar pride of place they find in *Midrash Shemuel* and *Tosafot Yom Tov* of R. Yom Tov Lipmann Heller (1578-1654).¹¹ We can thus reasonably start with them in trying to test whether medieval commentary included the kinds of readings in we found in the previous chapter.

Before jumping into their commentaries, we will briefly reacquaint ourselves with pertinent biographical details. R. Solomon Yitshaqi, known as Rashi (1041-1105),¹² lived in France and Germany and earned lasting fame for his concise commentaries, particularly on the Bible and the Talmud. Useful biographical information to remember when studying the commentary¹³ includes his having left France when he was twenty (and already married), spending the next ten years studying--in poverty-- in Mainz and Worms, at that time the best place in Christian Europe to absorb a complete tradition of Jewish learning.

R. Moses Maimonides, (1135 or 38-1204),¹⁴ was born in Cordoba, Spain, but the family had to leave in the face of the persecutions of Jews by the Almohades, a group of Muslims who insisted on converting adherents of other religions rather than tolerating them. Maimonides eventually took up residence in Fostat (modern day Cairo), where, until he was almost forty, his brother David actively ran the family business and supported his studies. When David was lost at sea, Maimonides

הַמְשָׁנָה, *Rabbi Obadiah of Bertinoro: His Life and Contribution to Interpretation of the Mishnah* (Mossad haRav Kook: Jerusalem, 1988), pp. 14-36. His being known as the Rav (an acronym for Rabbi Bertinoro, but also a Hebrew word meaning the Master) further indicates his influence.

⁹ *Tosafot Yom Tov*, another popular Mishnah commentary written by R. Yom Tov Lipmann Heller, focuses on Bertinoro's commentary as the starting point of interpretation of a Mishnah, and then often questions, expands, or responds to that work, as do many later commentators. For literature on Heller, see J. M. Davis, "Philosophy and the Law in the Writings of R. Yom Tov Lipman Heller," in I. Twersky and J. Harris, eds., *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature III*, p. 280, note 1 (where he mentions his Harvard 1990 dissertation, *R. Yom Tov Lipman Heller, Joseph ben Isaac ha-Levi, and Rationalism in Ashkenazic Jewish Culture 1550-1650*, pp. 339-72, and note 3).

¹⁰ Scholars have long noted that the commentary printed in the Rom edition of the Talmud was not that of Rashi, and call it pseudo-Rashi. However, Blechrovitz and Kasher, *מסכת אבות עם פירושי ראשונים, Tractate Avot with Medieval Commentaries*, (Jerusalem, 1972) claimed to have found Rashi's actual commentary; the one they printed differed only little from the one printed in the Vilna edition of the Talmud. In addition, R. Yonah—chronologically the first commentator to use this commentary— cites only those comments that appear in that commentary and refers to it as Rashi. In calling it Rashi, then, we may be erring in historical fact, but not in how the other authors in our study experienced it.

¹¹For literature on Heller, see above, note 9. Meiri and Maharal (R. Judah Loew, a sixteenth century Central European author), cited frequently by *Midrash Shemuel* and *Tosafot Yom Tov* respectively, will be discussed below.

¹² The biographical material on Rashi, including his date of birth (which differs from the more common date of 1040), comes from A. Grossman's chapter in *חכמי צרפת הראשונים: קורותיהם, דרכם בהנהגת הציבור, ויצירתם הרוחנית, The Early Sages of Tzarfat: Their Lives, Leadership, and Works* (Magnes Press: Jerusalem, 1995), pp. 121-254. The dates for his birth and death are on p. 121.

¹³ Admittedly, if even Blechrovitz and Kasher's edition was not actually Rashi, these facts are irrelevant.

¹⁴ Maimonides is so well known that contemporary authors rarely offer a full biography. In his introduction to *A Maimonides Reader*, I. Twersky provided a summary of his life and works, reprinted in *Studies in Jewish Law and Philosophy* (KTAV: New York, 1982). See also Joseph A. Bujis, "Introduction" *Maimonides: A Collection of Critical Essays* (U. of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame, 1988), pp. 3-4.

was forced to become a practicing physician in the Sultan's court, and possibly the official leader of the Egyptian Jewish community.¹⁵

R. Yonah of Gerona (1200-1263)¹⁶ lived in settings where the contrasts between Rashi and Maimonides caused tension. Trained in Tosafist academies, schools that built on Rashi's ideas in deepening their understanding of the Talmud and Jewish legal texts, R. Yonah actively joined an attempt by one of his teachers to ban the reading of Maimonides' philosophical writings.

Nevertheless, his later works display a great familiarity with the Egyptian rabbi's work; much of his Avot commentary, in fact, can be seen as a response to Maimonides' interesting ideas about proper Jewish character.

R. Simon b. Zemah Duran (1361-1444) lived in Spain but fled to Algiers during the rioting of 1391.¹⁷ His main renown stems from his *Tashbets*, a work of legal responsa, and *Magen Avot*, the three-part philosophical introduction to his commentary on Avot. While philosophy remained an issue of concern, questions connected to persecution, religious disputation, and adjustment to a new community and culture are also prominent in his commentary. Since the work dates from after his flight to Algiers,¹⁸ it provides useful contrast to haYizhari's interpretation, written at just about the same time.

We chose these four commentaries for their obvious influence; for reasons we will explain in a moment, one more commentary, less influential than these, needs to be added as well, that of R. Menahem haMeiri (1249-1315).¹⁹ Like R. Yonah, Meiri relied heavily on Maimonides and Rashi, although from a different cultural perspective. Living in Provence, a region where philosophy had already struck deep roots,²⁰ his acceptance of Maimonides' ideas was more wholehearted and less suspicious than was R. Yonah's.

We will need to look at Meiri somewhat carefully, since he in fact reads Avot in some of the same ways as we found so remarkable in haYizhari, Hayyun, and Abarbanel, raising the possibility that he should be credited with introducing—or, considering what we have seen in Avot de-Rabi Natan, reintroducing--the mode of exegesis we are now tracking.

¹⁵ See H. Davidson, "Maimonides' Putative Position as Official Head of the Egyptian Jewish Community" in *Hazon Nahum: Studies Presented to Norman Lamm in Honor of His 70th Birthday*, eds. J. Gurock and Y. Elman (Yeshiva U. Press: New York, 1997), 115-28. J. Levinger, "Was Maimonides 'Rais al-Yahud' in Egypt?" in I. Twersky, ed. *Studies in Maimonides* (Harvard U. Press: Cambridge, 1991), pp. 83-95, had previously reached similar conclusions.

¹⁶ A. Shrock, *Rabbi Jonah b. Abraham of Gerona* (London, 1948), pp. 1-60, and I. Ta-Shema, "חסידות אשכנז", *יונה גירונדי, האיש ופועלו בספרד: ר' מנחם המאירי ובעלי ההלכה המיימוניים בין תורה*, *German Pietism in Sefarad: R. Jonah of Gerona, The Man and His Works*, *Galut Abar Golab* ed. J. Kaplan (Jerusalem, 1988), pp. 165-94, provide the best biographies of R. Yonah.

¹⁷ I. Epstein, *Studies in the Communal Life of the Jews of Spain as Revealed in the Responsa of R. Simon b. Zemah Duran* (Hermon Press: New York, 1968), summarizes the events of Duran's life; the date of his flight from Spain appears on pp. 8-9. Julius Guttmann discusses Duran's thought briefly in *Philosophies of Judaism* (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston: New York, 1964), pp. 242-247, with N. Arieli's Ph.D. dissertation analyzing it at greater length (Hebrew U., 1976). The lengthiest discussion of Duran is still Jaulus' series of articles in the *Monatsschrift*, 1874-5, pp. 241-59, 308-17, 355-66, 398-412, 447-463, 499-514.

¹⁸ As we can see from the various comments that refer to his need to take a paid rabbinic position once he arrived there.

¹⁹ For Meiri's biography, see G. Stern, *Menahem haMeiri and the Second Controversy Over Philosophy* (Harvard U.: Ph.D. Diss., 1995), pp. 1-4. He summarizes Meiri's commentaries and monographs on pp. 65-123. The most recent discussion of Meiri's thought is M. Halbertal, *בין תורה*, *Between Torah and Wisdom: R. Menahem haMeiri and the Maimonidean Halakhists in Provence* (Magnes Press: Jerusalem, 2000).

²⁰ See I. Twersky, "Aspects of the Social and Cultural History of the Jews of Provence" *Journal of World History* XI (1968), pp. 185-207, also reprinted in *Studies in Jewish Law and Philosophy*, pp. 190-1 in particular discuss Provencal Jewry's openness to philosophy.

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After recognizing Meiri's similarities to our haYizhari and company, we will then show that he did not use these techniques either often enough or influentially enough to point to him as the instigator of this new form of Avot commentary. With that, we will be able to leave the medieval period.

A ROAD NOT TAKEN

Before we turn to our main goal, searching for Biblical readings of Avot prior to haYizhari, we should remember another use of such commentaries for historians, their contributing to an enriched understanding of each author's religious and intellectual perspective. For example, Rashi's commentary inserts economic issues and concerns where the tractate does not;²¹ this suggests that it would be productive to further analyze the role of economics in Rashi's thought in general.

For that, we would need to review Rashi's biography, the social, economic, and cultural settings in which he wrote,²² and his other writings (to see where he does or does not echo these ideas). With that fuller picture of Rashi's thought, we could then analyze the relationship between the ideas he expressed in Avot and his biography and/or his thought generally. That same exercise could work for the other exegetes in our study, producing a history of the themes and emphases that dominated pre-Abarbanel Avot commentary, in the context of the life and thought of the scholars who evinced them.

Fully aware of that option, this study focuses instead on exegetical technique, which shows us not *what* people were thinking as they read Avot, but *how* they thought about the text itself and the legitimate ways to derive meaning from that text. It is in that realm that haYizhari's, Hayyun's, and Abarbanel's contribution is most apparent; it is there that they most clearly shaped Jewish commentary in the decades to come.

Among the authors we have selected, four kinds of comments provide the bulk of the opportunities to register thoughts that go beyond a literal translation of the text. The particular version of the text an author had, the kinds of additions and digressions he inserted into his work, assumptions he made about the context of a Mishnah, and the way in which he defined ambiguous terms, all deeply affected the reading of the text itself. Reviewing these with select examples will show that these techniques may allow for highly personal or extratextual comments, but that they did not significantly affect the interpretation of the text itself.

VERSION OF THE TEXT

Girsa, the version of the text a commentator had in front of him, seems almost beyond that author's control, but clearly affects interpretation. While the text of the vast majority of Avot was uniform, several passages were open to significant variation. We might ignore this as irrelevant to exegesis,

²¹ See 5:8, where the Mishnah refers to **בצורת**, a famine in which some go hungry and some do not. Rashi assumes that that famine results from rising prices, when it would have been equally reasonable to assume that it results from purely agricultural factors, such as crop failures or poor rainfall. Especially in the context of the Mishnah, which sees this famine as punishment for a society in which some people failed to tithe, the agricultural explanations seem more intuitive.

In the same Mishnah, Rashi assumes that perversion of justice, **עוות הדין**, results from bribery. Several factors can create **עוות**, such as a desire to curry favor with one of the sides to the dispute. Rashi specifies bribery as the source of the problem, again putting money at the forefront.

For other examples, see his comments to 5:11, 2:5, 2:4, 2:1, 1:15, 1:2, 4:21, and 2:2.

²² For Rashi's focus on the economic, for example, we can note Europe's eleventh century economic upswing, when it moved from being an agrarian subsistence economy to one of greater trade, wealth, and economic activity. On these developments, see J. Favier, *Gold and Spices: The Rise of Commerce in the Middle Ages*, trans. C. Higgitt (Holmes and Meier: New York, 1998) p. 127, R. W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (Yale U. Press: New Haven, 1992 reprinting), pp. 44-5, and P. Spufford, *Money and Its Use in Medieval Europe* (Cambridge U. Press: Cambridge, 1988), p. 92.

but it turns out that precisely those texts stimulated comments that reflect the themes stressed by each author elsewhere in the commentary.

The fourth Mishnah of the second chapter presents a useful example of a text with several versions, in which each commentator's *girsā* led to a reading that fit surprisingly well with that commentator's themes elsewhere in the tractate. Again, these scholars may have only been recording the version they found in the book in front of them. Nonetheless, the personal and extratextual quality of these interpretations is striking.

Rashi recorded the reading “שסופו להשמע אל תאמר על דבר שאפשר לשמוע”, do not say about a thing that is possible to hear that it will be heard in the end,” which he interprets as requiring Jews to go to hear any available piece of knowledge about Torah as soon as possible. For that reading, the Mishnah warns against assuming that להשמע סופו, that that knowledge will still be available at a more convenient time.

His reading fits smoothly with the words of the text he cites.²³ At the same time, it accords suspiciously well with Rashi's view, expressed in many other places in the tractate,²⁴ that a Jew can only attain proper knowledge of Torah by connecting with an actual teacher—studying books, for example, would not be enough. We can in no way claim that Rashi was reading into this text, but we can note how conveniently his *girsā* works out for him.

Maimonides' version of that Mishnah read “אפשר לשמוע שסופו להשמע אל תאמר דבר שא” do not say a matter that is impossible to hear, for in the end it will be heard.” He explains it as a warning against assuming that others will take the time and make the effort to understand a speaker who expresses himself poorly. For Maimonides, the text means “do not say a matter [in such a way] that [it] is impossible to hear [thinking] that in the end it will be heard.”

Although Maimonides includes or assumes some phrases in his interpretation, the fundamental guide of his reading is the text itself. That resulting reading also fits well with his interest in both the value and dangers of unclear communication.²⁵

²³ Rashi actually knew of other versions of the text, so an element of choice may have played a role in his interpretation. See also 1:13, where his version of the text leads him to see one who does not teach as liable for death, also stressing the teacher's importance.

²⁴ Rashi repeatedly assumes that study with a teacher was the best way to acquire knowledge of Torah, as in 4:13, which states “Exile yourself to a place of Torah [תורה מקום], and don't say that it will come after you...” In explaining the need to go to a place of Torah, Rashi says “the place where the Rav, the teacher, is.” When the Mishnah warns against believing that “it” will come after you, Rashi assumes that “it” is the teacher, and that one may not assume that that teacher will come to one's own town to teach.

Among the surprising exegeses incorporated in that reading, Rashi assumes that the use of a feminine pronoun—do not say that “she” will follow you—could refer to a teacher, when the word most simply refers to Torah, feminine in Hebrew. To make any grammatical sense, Rashi's interpretation must equate the teacher (a male) and Torah; when the Mishnah says that the Torah will not follow you, it must mean the teacher, since he is Torah. Too, the text refers to a place, and the interpretation to a person.

For other comments that stress the role of a teacher in study of Torah, see 1:6, 1:11, 2:7, 4:5, and, for negative possibilities of teaching, the second possibility in 4:5, as well as 4:6, and 4:7.

²⁵ Maimonides assumed, for example, that the Saduceean heresy was started by students exploiting an ambiguity in their teacher Antigonus' words, see 1:3. In the introduction to the final chapter of Sanhedrin, he noted the problems created by aggadah, the non-legal sections of the Talmud, which often make statements that are unbelievable at a literal level.

His awareness of these problems may have fueled his use of the famous “method of contradictions”. At least in the Guide of the Perplexed, he attempted to write in such a fashion that only people fully prepared for his ideas would be able to discern them. He seems to have striven for that work to have both an acceptable literal sense, as well as often containing a hidden meaning. His work would then fulfill the characterization of Proverbs 25:11, “Apples of gold in platings of silver.”

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Meiri recorded yet another version, “אפשר לשמעו שסופו להשמע אל תאמר דבר שאי” do not say a matter [in such a way] that [you think that it] is impossible to hear [or understand] for in the end it will be heard [understood].”²⁶ That leads Meiri, like Maimonides, to focus on esotericism.

According to Meiri, though, the Mishnah is warning teachers *not* to think they can express themselves in such a way that only those prepared for that knowledge will understand it. He thus obliquely rejects Maimonides’ belief that he could incorporate esoteric truths in such a way that only those prepared for them would understand them. Once again, his version of the text strongly supported his reading.

We do not know how commentators arrived at the textual version they included. They may have chosen the most congenial one among several manuscript versions or they may have simply recorded the single (or main) reading available to them. Either way, were they all using the same text, it would have been more difficult for each to interpret as he did, so that *girsā* is one aspect of a commentary that can lead to differing readings of the tractate, often ones that are more clearly extratextual than others.

COMMENTATORS’ ASIDES, DIGRESSIONS, AND ADDITIONS

A second kind of comment, one that affects the explanation of the actual text least but provides great insight into the commentator’s thought, is when the exegete provides information that does not directly relate to the words of the text in front of him. Much of the religious information we find in the commentaries of Maimonides, R. Yonah, Meiri, and Duran comes from such digressions.

For the first of a few examples, we turn to the longest comment in Maimonides’ work, the end of his explanation of R. Shimon b. Gamliel’s statement that he found no better strategy than silence.²⁷ Having finished his discussion of R. Shimon’s recommendation, Maimonides lengthily decries contemporaries who listen to improper Hebrew poetry at wine parties. From there, he moves to a detailed discussion of לשון הרע, slanderous gossip. None of that bears directly on the Mishnah, nor does Maimonides claim that it does; it is simply related information he found important to include, without reading it back into the text being discussed.

R. Yonah and Duran also incorporate extensive asides into their commentaries. When the Mishnah mentions future judgement—simply saying that we should keep in mind before Whom we are destined to provide an accounting—R. Yonah described with gusto and in great detail the embarrassment sinners will undergo at that time.²⁸ Similarly, when the text warns Jews against becoming self-confident in their righteousness (“do not believe in yourself until the day you die”), R. Yonah digresses into a discussion of the evil inclination.²⁹

Duran includes a wealth of personal information in his commentary. Readers know of his experiences as a judge,³⁰ his struggle with whether to accept money to serve as a communal leader,³¹ and many of his medical opinions.³²

Issues of *girsā* and author’s digressions affect the content of a commentary, but have little impact on the explanation of the text itself. Were these the only two ways in which commentators move beyond the text, we could comfortably characterize pre-Abarbanel commentary as literal,

²⁶ Havlin edition, p. 82-3.

²⁷ 1:17.

²⁸ 3:1, s.v. ולפני.

²⁹ 2:4, s.v. ואל תאמן.

³⁰ 4:7, 64b.

³¹ 4:5, 62a-64a, especially 63b-64a, including the very fact that he only took a job as a communal leader because he could not find work as a doctor, 64a.

³² Such as 5:12, 87b, where, on a Mishnah that discusses the differing kinds of students, he discusses the physical qualities of the brain that allow for understanding and retention. Other medical/physiological issues are at 3:1, 39b, 4:20, 72b, 5:19, 90b, and 2:8, 30a.

allowing themselves only to add other information they deemed relevant or interesting. Two other techniques alter the picture appreciably.

ASSUMED CONTEXT

Commentators on Avot often assume a context for a Mishnah that deeply affects the meaning of a passage, without changing the ordinary meaning of the words. Maimonides, for example, assumed that Aristotle's categories of speech (positive, negative, prohibited, and neutral), adjusted to fit a Torah context, were relevant to the Mishnah's comments about silence.

That assumed frame of reference allows Maimonides to limit R. Shimon b. Gamliel's rule to the middle category, permissible speech, but sees it as saying nothing about either preferred or discouraged speech.³³ Rashi adds context as well, only for him it was usually economic, as we noted earlier.³⁴

AMBIGUITIES IN THE TEXT

A final category consists of those texts that are incomprehensible without some kind of commentarial input. One Mishnah in Avot, for example, orders Jews to

Exile yourself to a place of Torah [אֶמְקוֹם תּוֹרָה], and don't say that it will come after you, that your friends will establish it in your hands, and do not rely on your intelligence (or insight).³⁵

Commentators must decide what "it" the Mishnah intends. The simplest antecedent is Torah, but then the Mishnah's statement becomes nonsensical, since obviously Torah itself cannot come after a person. The commentator must explain what it is that will not come to a place lacking in Torah.

Rashi interprets the key phrase, אֶמְקוֹם תּוֹרָה, as "the place where the *Rav*, the teacher, is." Other commentators saw the value of the place in its general atmosphere or the presence of friends who support one's learning, so that the whole place is important, not just a particular teacher. They, too, needed to explain what would not follow a person, but located that lack in the place as a whole, not a particular individual. Clearing up the text's inherent ambiguity was a necessary part of interpretation, but could also lead to meanings that related to issues other than the text itself.

These ambiguities were often created by a particular word or phrase, so that we can pinpoint where the commentator inserted himself into the text. One example is Rashi and Maimonides' respective definitions of בּוֹר, a clearly derogatory term for a person lacking knowledge, but which leaves unspecified which knowledge is missing.³⁶ For Rashi, the בּוֹר is someone who does not know about business matters, whereas for Maimonides it is a person who has not achieved ethical or intellectual sophistication.

Similarly, Maimonides and Meiri interpret אֶפֶרֶק עוֹל תּוֹרָה, one who throws off the yoke of Torah, in ways that may reflect interests of theirs that are independent of the text itself. Since the yoke of Torah is an undefined term—it could refer to obedience to *mitsvot*, for example—any definition that includes a person not fully submitting to the discipline of Torah can legitimately be included.

³³ 1:17.

³⁴ See notes 21 and 22.

³⁵ 4:13. For a fuller discussion of Rashi's view, see above, note 25.

³⁶ 2:5. See also 4:21, where Rashi translates תַּאֲוָה as greed. Literally, the word means lust, which is ambiguous—Numbers 11:4 considers the desire for meat a lust. Usually, though, it refers to sexual desire.

See also Maimonides on מֵיִם הָרְעִים, bad waters, 1:11. The term on its own is meaningless, so Maimonides' definition of it as heresy is as defensible as any other; it also fits perfectly with the general tenor of his commentary. Duran, 5:21, 92a, defines לִרְדּוֹף, to chase or run, as to review one's studies. The Mishnah itself does not qualify the "running," so the commentator must.

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Maimonides defines a פורק as one who denies the Divine origin of the Torah. His definition is particularly noticeable, since he interprets the opposite phrase, עול תורה מקבל, one who accepts the yoke of Torah, as one who constantly involves himself in the reading of Torah.³⁷ פורק עול, then, would most logically have meant one who rejects that continuous study, either by not studying at all, or by studying less than continuously. Meiri defines the פורק as one who focuses too much on his physical needs, which parallels his concern with appropriate but not excessive attention to the physical.³⁸

Each of the above-enumerated exegetical strategies allows the commentator to have input into the text's meaning, taking it out of the realm of translation, and yet remains fully within the range of *peshat* as we have defined it, defensible contextual interpretation. In none of these cases is the commentator openly violating the simplest reading of the words in front of him. The assumed context or the particular meaning of words he adopts may surprise us, but each of these readings could be seen as contextual.

ADDED TECHNIQUES OF R. YONAH AND MEIRI

R. Yonah and Meiri added several other approaches worth noting here, in that they foreshadow some of what we have seen in Abarbanel. R. Yonah occasionally related presumably independent clauses of a Mishnah to each other. For example, the words "whoever speaks excessively brings about sin" follow the words "and study is not the essential, rather action [is]."³⁹ Taken on its own, the first clause easily reads as discouraging verbosity in general.

Because of the preceding phrase that refers to study, however, R. Yonah sees the Mishnah as only worried about excessive speech while studying and teaching Torah—in those circumstances, talking too much might lead to a misunderstanding of the piece of Torah under discussion. He has thus assumed that the sayings in Avot should at least sometimes be seen as continuations of each other.

Elsewhere, the Mishnah asserted that laughter and lightheadedness lead to sexual impropriety.⁴⁰ Despite the text's only prohibiting actual frivolity, R. Yonah assumed that the Mishnah was encouraging the cultivation of the opposite traits-- levelheadedness and awe—to protect against such impropriety. As he tells us, it was the later clauses of the Mishnah-- which all list סייגים, methods of safeguarding religious life—that led him to read it as a proactive recommendation, foregoing the more obvious option that it was a warning against certain improper actions.

Yet these examples were not central to R. Yonah's exegesis. He generally assumed cohesiveness only within a Mishnah,⁴¹ and even that inconsistently. He once, in the third chapter, offered a characterization of a series of Mishnayot or a chapter as a whole, but it had no noticeable impact on his interpretation of the chapter in question.⁴²

³⁷ 3:5.

³⁸ P. 117. 1:14, p. 53-4. Meiri translates "וכשאני לעצמי" (literally, if I am for myself) as "if I focus on עצמי, my bodily needs, מה אני, what am I?" Even there, however, he is bothered only by exclusive focus on the physical. For other discussions of the physical, positive attitudes are expressed in 3:10, p. 124-5, 3:4, p. 115, 1:5, p. 29-30, and 1:17, p. 60-2. Involvement with the physical presented dangers as well; aside from the פורק עול, see 3:8, p. 122, and 4:10, p. 180.

³⁹ 1:17, s.v. ואל תתיאש. See also 1:7, s.v. וכל המרבה.

⁴⁰ 3:13.

⁴¹ Even this, only when a single rabbi made both statements, giving at least some reason to suspect a connection.

⁴² 3:2, the very end of s.v. ר' חנינא, R. Hanina.

Until this point we have shown that the main commentators on Avot from the eleventh through the fourteenth centuries incorporate religious ideas that reflected events and ideas from their own lives. Importantly, however, they did so using exegetical techniques that still allowed for a reasonable contextual sense of the text.

THE SPECIAL CASE OF MEIRI

We need to discuss Meiri at some greater length, as he utilizes several of the techniques we saw in the last chapter. For example, he frequently offers more than one interpretation of the text despite a lack of any flaws in his first interpretation, reminding us of the multiplicity of meaning that we pointed to as Biblical in the previous chapter. Admittedly, that does not fully distinguish Meiri from R. Yonah, who also occasionally offered more than one reading, or Duran, who often cited more than one of his predecessors' ideas.

We see Meiri as different from each of these commentators. R. Yonah notes two interpretations of a text only rarely; while we cannot ignore that element of his work, we also cannot say that it characterizes his hermeneutic in any way. Duran does not suggest more than one interpretation of his own, he simply is aware of earlier scholars who disagreed about the meaning of various texts, again not a hermeneutically interesting move. Meiri, in contrast, will volunteer a second explanation of the text without any apparent problem with the first one.⁴³

Meiri also innovated in assuming that even purely informational texts were meant to have some ethical purpose. Thus, when the Mishnah records R. Yohanan b. Zakkai's praises of his students, Meiri explains that this was to lend credibility to their ideas of the single character trait upon which to anchor one's personal development.⁴⁴ As much as possible, he resisted conceding that a statement in the Mishnah had no ethical purpose.

Earlier, we noted that a belief in omnisignificance underlies many of the readings we have been discussing, both in Midrash and among fifteenth century Avot commentators. Meiri's assumption that each *statement* in Avot (as a whole) had to convey a message of ethical significance is but one step removed from assuming that each *part* of each statement had to contribute as well. Meiri did not take that step, so this aspect of his work did not affect his exegesis, but it is a preconception that could lead to the kinds of readings we saw in haYizhari, Hayyun, and Abarbanel.

At the same time, Meiri, more than other commentators, was willing to forego the literal meaning of texts, dismissing some statements as hyperbole. For example, he reads the Mishnah's call to leave one's house wide open for guests as an expansive way of encouraging Jews to be hospitable.⁴⁵ Other exegetes, who report the Midrashic traditions that Abraham and Job acted this way, seem to have read the text literally.⁴⁶

Elsewhere, without any textual support, Meiri twice interprets the word "world" as actually referring to people. Both in the famous phrase, "the world stands on three things,"⁴⁷ and when he

⁴³ See, for some examples, 1:6, pp. 32-34 (on whether "buying" is harder or easier than "making", in terms of a teacher or a friend), 1:7, 39-41 (three interpretations of "do not despair of punishment") and 42-4 (four versions of "do not make yourself one of the עורכי הדינים").

⁴⁴ 2:8, p. 92. See also 4:17, p. 208, which seems to declare only that "An hour of repentance and good deeds in this world outweighs all the spiritual peace of the next." Meiri says it actually comes to stress the importance of dedication to God's service, the lesson of the previous Mishnah. The principle that all of Avot provides ethical instruction forced Meiri to note that the fifth chapter will not contain such instruction, page 219. His amending this on p. 221, noting that the first two Mishnayot *did* teach a religious lesson but that the rest of the chapter would not, suggests that he was pleased to have found a lesson in those first two, since they fit better in his conception of the tractate.

⁴⁵ 1:5, p. 26.

⁴⁶ Prof. Jay Harris suggests that Meiri's dismissing texts as hyperbole might be connected to his assumption that they must have ethical significance; since he saw the text more normatively than earlier commentators, he had to take greater care about which statements were obligatory, and to what extent.

⁴⁷ 1:2.

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mentions the Talmudic statement “without מעמדות (rotating groups of Jews who gathered in their home towns to serve as the symbolic representatives of the entire people in offering the daily sacrifice in the Temple) the world would not have been sustained,” Meiri limits the “world” to human existence.⁴⁸

This was not completely revolutionary, as Maimonides had previously interpreted the word that way. When the Mishnah says that evildoers destroy “the world that was created with ten utterances,” Maimonides had said they actually only hurt their own souls.⁴⁹ That reading could in turn rely on a Mishnah in *Pesabim*, which said that whoever destroys a single soul is as if he has destroyed an entire world.⁵⁰

Maimonides and the Mishnah, however, only read the phrase “destroying a world” as referring to a single soul. Meiri, in contrast, used the word “עלמא, world” in a non-destruction context and as referring to human society rather than a single individual.

Aramaic does use the word עלמא, the world, in the phrase כולי עלמא (the whole world), a colloquialism for people in general. Meiri does not cite that phrase as support, giving us no reason to believe that that fueled his reading, nor does he offer any evidence that the same idiom exists in Hebrew.

Meiri also sometimes expands the Mishnah to areas it did not apparently address. When the Mishnah recommends deliberation in acting as a judge, Meiri assumes the advice actually applies to all areas of life.⁵¹ When it claims that increased charity increases the peace of the world, Meiri says all *mitsvot* do so.⁵² Broadening simple statements into more general advice, usually with ethical or intellectual import, is an important element of Meiri’s commentary.⁵³

Meiri’s innovative exegesis had little identifiable impact in the first hundred and fifty years after he wrote his commentary, so that he makes an unlikely candidate to have been the prime factor in bringing such readings into the mainstream. Abarbanel quotes him several times,⁵⁴ suggesting *some* influence, but he does not generally cite examples of the kinds of exegesis we are studying.

At the same time as we deny Meiri’s having brought about a change in the way others read Avot, he did prefigure it. Aside from his similarities to what we have seen in Abarbanel, *Midrash Shemuel*, one of the prime examples of sixteenth-century midrashic exegesis of Avot, cites Meiri extensively. Without placing too much emphasis on amounts of quotation, Meiri’s prominence in that work suggests that R. Samuel Uceda, *Midrash Shemuel*’s author, felt some common cause with the Provencal scholar.

A DISSIMILAR CONTEMPORARY: R. JOSEPH YAVETS

Before 1450, we have seen that the exegetical techniques we find in Abarbanel, the willingness to “read in” to Avot as opposed to deriving meaning from it, did not represent a major element in Avot interpretation. Our investigation thus far, however, has not precluded the possibility that haYizhari’s commentary had an immediate impact on Spanish Jewish readings of rabbinic texts. We might argue

⁴⁸ *Ta’anit* 27b. Meiri’s comments appear on p. 13 and 16 of the Havlin edition.

⁴⁹ 5:1.

⁵⁰ 4:5.

⁵¹ 1:1, p. 6. *Avot de-Rabi Natan* had previously offered this expansion.

⁵² 2:7, p. 88. Meiri’s claim is difficult, since the Mishnah singles out charity. Havlin, p. 116, notes that it also contradicts R. Yonah’s reading of the Mishnah.

⁵³ Pp. 163-4. For another example, see 4:5, pp. 174-5, where Meiri takes the “three crowns” that the Mishnah mentions much more broadly than simply being about Torah, the kingship, and the priesthood.

⁵⁴ For examples, see 2:2 (that rebuke needs to be well-presented), 3:12 (on the similarity between נוח לראש and לתשחורת קל), 4:1 (that the question “Who is wise?” really means “who *will be* wise?”), 5:3 (Meiri’s list of miracles at the Sea, and 5:6 (Meiri’s interpretation of כתב, מכתב, and לוחות in the Mishnah that lists those as among the items created on the Sixth Day of Creation at twilight).

instead that, while Duran left before haYizhari's impact was felt, Hayyun and Abarbanel may only reflect the aftermath of haYizhari's impact, and should not be counted among the innovators of this hermeneutic.

To discount that possibility, we will review a commentary written by Abarbanel's contemporary and colleague, R. Yosef Yavets. Seeing that Yavets did not engage in such commentary highlights how innovative Abarbanel still was in his own time, and that he played an important role in spreading that method of reading Avot.⁵⁵

Yavets (1438-1505)⁵⁶ lived through both expulsions of Jews in the Iberian Peninsula, from Spain in 1492 and from Portugal in 1497. Scholars take most of the biographical information about him from his own writings.⁵⁷ He mentions his brother-in-law, R. Isaac `Arama (author of the well-known exegetical-homiletical tract עקדת יצחק, *Binding of Isaac*) and that he studied with Abarbanel in Lisbon.⁵⁸ We also know that he moved from Lisbon to Sicily, Naples, and Mantua (where he became the communal preacher).

Yavets refers to himself as מגולי ספרד, an exile of Sefarad, which may mean either that he was born in or lived in Spain at some point prior to 1492, but may refer to the exile from Portugal.⁵⁹ His children and grandchildren moved to Salonika and Constantinople, where his books were first printed.⁶⁰

Midrash Shemuel cited Yavets more often than any other earlier writers; several later thinkers⁶¹ also accepted Yavets' views, and he made a few other significant contributions to Hebrew literature.⁶² It seems reasonable to expect, therefore, that his commentary provides useful information as to the state of Avot study in his time.

Yavets' commentary,⁶³ placed in the context of the medieval works we have seen thus far, is certainly original; like Abarbanel, he raises issues, questions, and ideas that had not been central to

⁵⁵ Hayyun's מילי דאבות, while interesting in terms of tracking influence on Abarbanel, had little if any beyond that.

⁵⁶ G. Nigal, "ומתפלספים, תורה ומצוות דעותיו של ר' יוסף יעבץ על פילוסופיה," *The Opinions of R. Yosef Yavets About Philosophy, Philosophers, Torah, and Mitsvot* באר 1 (1976), pp. 258-87, provides almost the only concentrated study of Yavets' thought, and includes the few available facts about his life. Nigal dates Yavets' death at 1505, in contrast to M. Kellner's date of 1507, *Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Oxford U. Press: Oxford, 1986), p. 161.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, note 23. Nigal structures his study completely on the basis of Yavets' reaction to philosophy. While Yavets admittedly criticizes philosophy bitterly in his אור החיים, *Light of Life*, that view does not dominate the Avot commentary in the same way. Readers of that commentary—most importantly Uceda, whose *Midrash Shemuel* became the vehicle through which later readers became acquainted with Yavets' ideas-- would note the kinds of themes that arose in Avot, rather than any anti-philosophical focus.

⁵⁸ Nigal, p. 258-9.

⁵⁹ Nigal, p. 260.

⁶⁰ See *idem*, "השפעתו הספרותית של ר' יוסף יעבץ," *The Literary Influence of R. Yosef Yavets*, Kiryat Sefer 51 (1976), p. 290.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, pp. 289- 303. Aside from *Midrash Shemuel* (see in the text), Nigal notes that Shelah (R. Isaiah Horowitz, sixteenth century) and several Hasidic thinkers relied heavily on Yavets.

⁶² Most interestingly, he claims the Expulsion punished Jews' excessive interest in philosophy, see Nigal's discussion, "דעותיו," p. 260.

⁶³ A reprint of the Warsaw, 1880 edition of Yavets' commentary is included in volume 2 of *The Complete Writings of Yavets* (Hebrew, Manchester, 1982).

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earlier Avot commentary, such as reward and punishment, the workings of the Universe, and God's providence over mankind. These new topics and interests were developed in notably lengthier comments than those from the medieval period.

Different as he is from earlier commentary, Yavets is not yet the same as Abarbanel, since the novelty in his commentary does not extend to modes of interpretation. In reviewing some of Yavets' central themes, we will see both how he differs from those who came before, and that he had not been influenced by haYizhari's methodology, despite his traveling in the same circles as Abarbanel.

YAVETS' ORDINARY READINGS

Yavets noted and explained the connection of two or more Mishnayot more often than we have seen so far; indeed, he does so quite regularly. To pick just one example, we have previously discussed the series of paragraphs where R. Yohanan b. Zakkai praises his five students, and then quizzes them about the central religious characteristic to cultivate. Yavets correlates each of the students' choice of trait with the aspect of their personality R. Yohanan had praised.⁶⁴

We have already seen, however, that R. Yonah had been somewhat concerned with such links. More importantly, Yavets was following the example of R. Joseph ibn Shoshan, a fourteenth century author whose work on Avot regularly commented on the connection among Mishnayot. Yavets cited ibn Shoshan often, so that we can see where he would learn that habit. Other than that, though, ibn Shoshan's commentary does not innovate exegetically, nor does Yavets'.⁶⁵

Like the medievals, Yavets' comments, as interesting as they are, leave the words and grammar of the text untouched. He does, however, turn the focus of an Avot commentary in remarkably new directions. Discussing three of the central themes of the work, reward and punishment (and suffering, a related issue), Providence, and Torah study, will help us concisely show how he used ordinary exegesis to get to new topics.

We have previously mentioned Antignos' call not to worship the Creator in order to receive a reward. Reading this, Yavets insists that one may include reward as one among several motivating factors in performing *mitsvot*. Antignos only intended to say, according to Yavets, that reward should not be the *sole* motive in one's observance.⁶⁶ He does not attempt, however, to read that significant limitation back into Antignos' words; he simply asserts it as true.

Perhaps fueling that view was Yavets' assumption elsewhere in the commentary that the sole purpose of this world is to achieve a proper share of the next one.⁶⁷ If life is simply a way to secure other-worldly reward, it makes sense that a person could have that in mind while acting in the way God wants.

⁶⁴See 1:3, 1:5, 1:15, 2:15, 3:12, 3:16, 4:6, and 5:1 for other examples of Yavets guiding his commentary by its link with previous Mishnayot.

⁶⁵ Ibn Shoshan's commentary was published by Blechrovitz and Kasher (Jerusalem, 1968). For a discussion of central themes in the commentary, see M. Shmidman, *R. Joseph ibn Shoshan and Medieval Commentaries on Avot* (PhD Diss.: Harvard, 1980). Yavets quotes ibn Shoshan more than any other commentary; the only commentary that he quotes almost as often, that of R. Isaac b. Israel, was also published by Blechrovitz and Kasher (Institute of the Complete Torah: Jerusalem, 1982). R. Isaac similarly innovates only in the kinds of typologies and ideas he offers.

⁶⁶ 1:3. Others had interpreted Antignos more plainly, that reward should be irrelevant to one's observance; Yavets, like Abarbanel, took a different position.

⁶⁷ 4:16. The Mishnah refers to the world as a **פְּרִוּזָּה**, an antechamber. Yavets takes the analogy a step further than usual, assuming that the *only function* of an antechamber is entry into the main section of the palace. In parallel, the Mishnah meant to indicate that the sole purpose of this world is entry into the next. The furthering of the metaphor beyond earlier commentators' views does not affect the grammatical construction of the original statement.

The key to reward and punishment, Yavets claims, lies in the way people respond to available opportunities. The פרקליט or positive force created by an action of *mitsvah* depends on the number of opportunities the person had—even a person who performed few *mitsvot*, but seized every chance that arose, would garner great reward.⁶⁸

Punishment also depends on how well one resists opportunities for sin. Yavets interprets a reference to God as יודע, knower (an ambiguous term), as meaning He recognizes each person's level of success at resisting sin when the occasion presents itself.⁶⁹

In each case, the struggle to fulfill God's Will counts more than whatever was achieved, a comforting thought in an era when the physical troubles of exile and persecution might easily prevent Jews from living up to the Torah's ideals to the extent they would have liked.

Yavets stresses that the bulk of reward comes in the next world, with only a little provided in this one.⁷⁰ He does recognize exceptions, such as those who have already earned a full share of reward in the World to Come; they will receive some overflow in this life.⁷¹

The Mishnah mentions the reward given to one who honors the Torah; Yavets explains that since the honor does not help the Torah itself, it must help the person, by giving him honor in this world.⁷² Study of Torah is an exception in that it will specifically not get rewarded in this world, to spare the recipient the pain of having to share that reward with others.⁷³

Yavets' comments on suffering provide some further details of his view of the relationship between present and future worlds. As part of his explanation of Scripture's prohibition of rejoicing in an enemy's downfall, Yavets says that suffering indicates closeness to God, since God is giving the recipient of that suffering his punishment in this world.⁷⁴

Indeed, Yavets admits that he finds the suffering of the righteous a less troublesome question than how God chooses which people are granted the privilege of absolving their sins through relatively mild sufferings in this world, and which are forced to wait until after death.⁷⁵ The prosperity of the wicked similarly does not trouble him, since he understands that God gives evildoers time to either complete their self-destruction or to take refuge in repentance.⁷⁶

Yavets expressed his views of the determining factors in how much punishment one gets and where that punishment will occur— topics the Mishnah does not obviously raise—without significantly altering the usual understanding of the words or phrases of the tractate. A similar reliance on assumed context and added information characterizes his expression of his views on השגחה, Providence, to which we turn next.

PROVIDENCE IN YAVETS

A Mishnah records a statement made by Hillel when he encountered a drowning victim floating in the water. Hillel, addressing the corpse, said: "Because you have drowned others, you have been drowned; and in the end those who drowned you will be drowned."⁷⁷

⁶⁸ 2:16. Yavets does recognize that performing a larger number of *mitsvot* earns a special reward, מתן שכרן מצוות של, the gift-reward of the righteous. Ordinary people, however, earn great reward simply by utilizing the possibilities that present themselves.

⁶⁹ 4:22. Yavets claims that if we knew the percentage of opportunities people actually exploit, the resulting calculus would explain most of the issue of theodicy.

⁷⁰ 3:13.

⁷¹ 5:19.

⁷² 4:6.

⁷³ 2:16.

⁷⁴ 4:19.

⁷⁵ 4:15.

⁷⁶ 2:6.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*

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Questioning how the Mishnah learned of the incident, Yavets assumes someone must have overheard Hillel, and identifies that as the workings of השגחה, of God's providence ensuring that Hillel's statement would become known.

Yavets' assumption that Providence led to Hillel's being overheard seems odd. As the leading teacher of his generation, it is at least reasonable that Hillel would have an entourage of at least one or two students when he traveled. Even if he was not generally accompanied, he still most likely would only have addressed a corpse out loud when he was with other people.

Additionally, Avot tends to present central themes of various rabbis' thought, not statements they made only once; Hillel's comment to the corpse may have occurred only once, but unless it was a recurring element of his worldview, it might not have been recorded in Avot.

Several reasonable assumptions, then, offer natural ways for this incident to have become known. Hillel might have been knowingly in the presence of others when the incident occurred; he might have himself mentioned it frequently; he might have said something similar to every victim of a violent death that he saw; or at least he may have constantly stressed his view that people's sins will return to haunt them. Yavets' instead crediting השגחה accentuates his focus on it.⁷⁸

Yavets believed that Divine supervision even affected ordinary social interactions. For example, the literal sense of the verse “פְּלִגֵּי מַיִם לֵב מֶלֶךְ בְּיַד ה'”⁷⁹ is that God can control kings' actions, thoughts, and feelings. R. Yonah, who cites this verse in his Avot commentary, reads it to mean that kings have no free will whatsoever, that their actions are completely directed according to His Will.⁸⁰

Yavets applies the verse even to ordinary human beings, significantly expanding the scope of God's direct intervention in human affairs. The Mishnah declares כל שרוח הבריות נוחה הימנו, רוח המקום נוחה הימנו, anyone whom other people find pleasing, Heaven finds pleasing,” meaning that those who please others or give them benefit will concomitantly gain Heaven's goodwill.

Yavets, however, reads the Mishnah in reverse, that only those with whom Heaven is pleased will manage to earn favor in others' eyes, and cites “פְּלִגֵּי מַיִם, Streams of water, etc.” as support.⁸¹ Although he does not define exactly how, Yavets is clearly assuming that God's being pleased or displeased with someone affects how others react to that person.⁸²

To some extent, God's Providence seems to be expressed through the agency of the גלגלים, the Heavenly spheres. When R. Aqiva uses the metaphor of גבאים, debt collectors, to express the certainty of some daily Divine retribution for human misdeeds, Yavets identifies the גלגלים, the Heavenly spheres as those גבאים, debt collectors.⁸³ Some of the evil that befalls people, in other words, is a result of the influence of the spheres, carrying out the dictates of Divine Providence.

⁷⁸ See also 2:8, where Yavets similarly inserts השגחה unexpectedly. The Mishnah warns against taking pride in one's Torah accomplishments, to which Yavets adds that the person should instead thank God for the Providence that enabled him to do so.

⁷⁹ Proverbs 21:1.

⁸⁰ 2:3. In that Mishnah, Yavets used פְּלִגֵּי מַיִם similarly to R. Yonah, noting that communal workers who lobby kings on behalf of the Jewish people should not imagine that it was their skill that led to their success, since the will of kings is in God's hands.

⁸¹ 3:10.

⁸² This is also one of the few, perhaps only, examples of innovative exegesis in Yavets, since here he has reversed the cause and effect of the ordinary understanding- it is Heaven's attitude towards a person that affects others' attitudes, the reverse of the usual reading.

⁸³ 3:16. Yavets reads the phrase זבחי מתים, sacrifices of dead people, as also meaning the גלגלים because they do not act of their own volition, see 3:3. Those who eat without discussing Torah, Yavets explains, show that they think that the גלגלים provide their food, instead of recognizing Divine Providence. His calling the righteous a לשכינה מעון, a place of lodging for the Divine Presence, 5:11, provides another example of God's interest in the world.

Although not perhaps as coherent a whole as his views on reward and punishment, Yavets nonetheless manages to insert significant information about Providence into his commentary. Whether it is by controlling people and kings, allowing the Heavenly spheres to rule the happenings of a person's life, or just by insuring that a casual incident will become famous, God's presence and impact is felt often in Yavets' world. As always with Yavets, these many innovative ideas come with little exegetical innovation.

STUDY OF TORAH

The most significant factor shaping Yavets' comments about study of Torah were his clear belief that it was embattled and improperly appreciated in his time. A Mishnah in the third chapter discusses the various sizes of groups of people studying Torah, all of whom merit being joined by the Divine presence. The Mishnah guarantees such a visitation for groups of at least two.⁸⁴

For a person who studies alone, the Mishnah says only that God establishes a reward. Yavets assumes that the study of a single student is not important enough to merit a Divine visitation, and that the one person is included in the Mishnah to console students of Torah, who he says are all alone in their generation. Since the text does not suggest such a plight, Yavets' comment seems to reflect his own time more than that of the Mishnah.

Further expressing his sense of the study of Torah as embattled, Yavets uses Ben Bag Bag's seemingly innocuous recommendation, "הפך בה והפך בה דכולא בה ובה תחזי", turn over and over in it, for everything is in it and constantly examine it" to launch a diatribe against secular knowledge.⁸⁵ Interestingly, Yavets originally only speaks of Torah as all-encompassing in terms of achieving רוה הקדש, Divine inspiration. Later he adds and stresses that all knowledge can be found in Torah.⁸⁶

Yavets makes clear that his interest in the statement is more than textual when he writes that one ought not to anger Torah by turning to her foreign competitors. He even rejects turning to other disciplines just as "טבחיות, ואופות רקחות, spice-maidens, cooks, and bakers,"⁸⁷ meaning even while assuming that Torah was primary.

Using the Talmudic metaphor⁸⁸ of a breast for Torah, in that it always provides new succor to those who try to take from it, Yavets specifically mentions subjects studied widely by Spanish Jewry-- philosophy, medicine, and logic-- as disciplines that cannot match Torah in value. Even review of Torah should be preferred to studying new areas of outside disciplines, as the gains made from review outweigh the value in all other wisdoms.

In one more example, Yavets suggests that R. Shimon declares a person who stops his study of Torah to notice the beauties of Nature capably liable because the masses celebrate when anyone stops learning.⁸⁹ Students of Torah, in Yavets' world, were a select few, who bore the degradations of others, resisted the urge to stray into other, less valuable areas of study, and swam against the tide of the masses who would celebrate the cessation of such study. Even so, these vigorous and highly personal readings do not affect the explanation of the actual words of the text.

⁸⁴ 3:2.

⁸⁵ 5:25. Yavets in his other writings blamed secular knowledge for the Expulsion from Spain, see Nigal, above note 56, p. 277.

⁸⁶ 5:22. The second part, that all knowledge can be found in Torah, is similar to how R. Yonah read the words.

⁸⁷ The phrase comes from I Samuel 8:13, describing jobs for which a king will draft the people's children. Maimonides, , famously used this phrase in a letter to R. Yonatan of Lunel to explain that he only used subjects outside of Torah as servants to his prime concern, Torah.

⁸⁸ Eruvin 54b.

⁸⁹ 3:7. See also Nigal, p. 261, who cites Yavets as complaining about his audiences' lack of attention.

WHAT YAVETS TELLS US

Most directly for this study, Yavets provides particularly strong support for seeing Abarbanel's reading of Avot as still quite innovative. As one who knew Abarbanel and had studied with him, we would have expected Yavets' commentary to be similar to Abarbanel's in both themes and exegesis. That their similarity only extends to content shows that Abarbanel's hermeneutic was a step in a new direction.

Yet Yavets cannot be seen as a typical medieval commentary, either. Aside from his great length, he repeatedly engages in extended discussions of topics that were minimally interesting to the earlier Avot commentators.

Some of what has happened in Yavets comes directly from commentators we previously mentioned briefly. First, several earlier commentaries, ones that were not vital for our central purpose, already take Avot in new directions at relatively great length. The most important example is Ibn Shoshan, who stands between R. Yonah and Yavets, both chronologically and in style of commentary.

In the current context, we can again productively mention Duran, who, despite his similarities to other medieval commentators, indeed his heavy reliance upon them, did take Avot commentary in new directions. Earlier, we mentioned some of the personal information about Duran that we learn in his commentary;⁹⁰ a few more examples of such digressions and providing context will show his similarity to Yavets in this respect.

Having earlier mentioned his concern with judging, we can note that Duran sometimes reads an unqualified Mishnah as referring to judging in particular. He suggests that making one's Torah "fixed" (in the Mishnah's term) meant that a scholar must judge issues of Torah consistently for himself and for others, whether in adopting lenient or stringent positions.⁹¹ When the Mishnah envisions a situation where there are no אנשים, men of stature, Duran believes that it refers to a dearth of decisors of Jewish law.⁹²

Duran also gives free rein to his extensive interest in etymology and numerology (גמטריא). He records the Greek root of the word Tetragrammaton,⁹³ fully discusses the proper pronunciation of Jerusalem (noting the difference between Jewish and non-Jewish versions),⁹⁴ explains the name Avtalyon,⁹⁵ and supplies the source and pronunciation of the word בור (ignoramus).⁹⁶ He uses numerology to suggest meanings for the words מקום (literally, place, but in the Mishnah a reference to God)⁹⁷ and אלקים (another term for God),⁹⁸ and to explain why 18 is the age of marriage and seventy the average life span.⁹⁹

⁹⁰ See above, text at note 30.

⁹¹ 1:15, 13a, commenting on "עשה תורתך קבע", make your Torah fixed." This comment contrasts interestingly with his note in *Tashbetz* I:85 that, while *halakhab* permits using white wine for kiddush and the four cups drunk at the Pesah Seder, he personally refrains so as to take account of Nahmanides' objection to the practice. Further, see *Tashbetz* II:45, where Duran approvingly cites the Talmud's characterization of Sages as ruling leniently for others while acting stringently themselves.

⁹² 2:5, 25b.

⁹³ 1:2, 4a-b. The word does not appear in the Mishnah, making the entire discussion extraneous. Earlier in that Mishnah, he quoted ספר קורות אלכסנדרוס, a history of Alexander the Great.

⁹⁴ 1:5, 7b, even noting that the Moslems call the city *al-Kuds*.

⁹⁵ 1:10, 10b.

⁹⁶ 2:5, 25a. For Rashi and Maimonides' readings of the word, see above, text at note 36. See also 2:8, 29b, where Duran says that אב, father, is also a title for a man who excels at some endeavor (אמא is a parallel title for women), 2:14, on אפיקורס, and 3:14 on אלקים.

⁹⁷ 2:9, 31b.

⁹⁸ 3:14, 50b-51a.

⁹⁹ 5:21, 92a-b.

Numerology might also relate to his kabbalistic interests, the first significant impact of kabbalah on Avot commentary in the sources we are studying. His kabbalah is limited to manipulating letters of words and finding meaning in the number of times certain words appear in the Biblical text.¹⁰⁰ Despite its limited applications, the change from earlier commentary is notable.

COPING WITH A SATURATED TEXT: WHAT IBN SHOSHAN, DURAN, AND YAVETS SUGGEST ABOUT FOURTEENTH CENTURY AVOT COMMENTARY

Tracing Yavets' differences from earlier commentators has made us realize that already in the fourteenth century we find a shift towards longer and less textually bound writings on Avot. Were these the only examples, we might have suggested that the combination of Rashi, Maimonides, R. Yonah, and Meiri left little room for significant novelty in reading the text of Avot.

Faced with a text whose ambiguities had been largely resolved, commentators began to expand their focus when reading this text. Without providing new information about the textual issues of the tractate, these commentators began to read Avot less for itself than as a jumping off point for a broad consideration of Jewish ideas. That strategy apparently served them well, as their commentaries also were lengthily anthologized in Uceda's *Midrash Shemuel*.

Yavets thus sheds light on fifteenth century Avot commentary in several ways. First, he helps confirm that haYizhari's reading Avot as if it were a Biblical text had not become commonly accepted by the time Abarbanel wrote *Nahalat Avot*. Second, Yavets focuses attention on the growing length of Avot commentaries, and their greater interest in topics outside the text itself, over the course of the fourteenth century. That aspect of his commentary already suggests one reason haYizhari, Hayyun, and Abarbanel might have sought innovative ways of reading—the old ways of reading Avot had been exhausted.

To those of a textual frame of mind, new breath was needed. That freshness came from haYizhari and Abarbanel. In the next chapter, we will see that within eighty years after the completion of *Nahalat Avot*, the situation had changed radically. Between them, haYizhari, Hayyun, and Abarbanel had added almost infinite possibilities for interpretation of Avot or, indeed, any Jewish text.

¹⁰⁰ 3:5, 42b, Duran refers to *Sefer haBahir* and *Pirgei Hekhalot*, early kabbalistic works, in introducing the Mishnaic rabbi, R. Nehunya b. haQana. At 3:14, 51a-b, he interprets the Talmud's statement that Betsalel knew how to combine the letters that created the world as meaning that he knew the techniques of *Sefer Yetsirah*, an ancient work that some saw as kabbalistic, but that had also been interpreted by non-kabbalists such as R. Sa'adya Gaon.

In 4:20, 72a-b, Duran assumes that both מַעֲשֵׂה מִרְכָּבָה and פֶּרֶס — Talmudic terms for the study of esoteric matters-- refer to study of *Sefer Yetsirah* and playing with combinations of letters. In 5:4, 78a, he notes ten uses of the Tetragrammaton in the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15:1-21), and relates that to a kabbalistic doctrine about the various aspects of God that freed the Jews from Egypt.

CHAPTER THREE: WHAT WONDERS THEY WROUGHT

Until this point, we have focused on establishing that three fifteenth-century exegetes read Avot differently from those who came before, applying exegetical techniques to that rabbinic text that had previously been used in the reading of Bible. In the next chapter, when we try to define the origins of this change, we will be showing how it relates to fifteenth-century Jewish intellectual history in general, expanding historians' understanding of the Jewish past.

In this chapter, we will be proving that this change affected Avot study itself in two significant ways. First, we will show that the new exegesis had a lasting effect on at least four influential later readings of the tractate. Second, we will see that those commentators used the greater exegetical freedom to raise topics and themes that had not previously been a part of Avot commentary. Aside from its importance as an indicator of events in its own time, then, this change was important as the beginning of a lasting shift in how Jews absorbed Avot's messages.

That the two happened together also suggests—anticipating our concluding chapter for a moment—that rules of reading affect what texts mean in different eras. While we have already seen that a commentator's digressions and assumed context allow some flexibility—so that R. Joseph Yavets read Avot within a broader universe of ideas than had Rashi and Maimonides—a new hermeneutic expands the horizons of meaning even further.

Especially for traditional Jews, who self-consciously grounded their claims about the proper life in classical sources, expanded freedom of interpretation inherently expands the range of religious ideas they could comfortably maintain. Even as we continue to focus only on Avot in this chapter, then, we should pay attention to how much these authors are able to convert Avot from what earlier commentators had seen it discussing, to topics that seem to have nothing to do with the words of the text.

R. SAMUEL UCEDA'S MIDRASH SHEMUEL

The chronologically latest of the authors we will study in this chapter, R. Samuel Uceda in his *Midrash Shemuel*, was also the most influential.¹ We will discuss him first both because his work was the most widely disseminated and because, as the farthest in time from Abarbanel, he best proves the lasting impact of that mode of exegesis.

Uceda lived and served as the head of an academy in Safed in the sixteenth century and studied with such kabbalists as R. Isaac Luria, R. Moses Cordovero, and R. Hayyim Vital.² Safed at

¹ The work was actually split fairly evenly between commentary and anthology. Since here we seek to understand Uceda's textual method, we utilize only his own comments. In the later parts of this chapter, when we look at Almosnino's and Solomon *le-Beit haLevi's* (of the House of Levi; henceforth Solomon Levi) readings of the tractate, we will be using the anthology section as well.

² Uceda eulogized Luria upon his death; for the text of the eulogy, with introductory comments, see M. Pachter, 16ה במאה, מצפונות צפת: מחקרים ומקורות לתולדות צפת וחכמיה, *The Hidden Matters of Safed: Analyses and*

the time was an extremely poor city, dependant on contributions from outside of Palestine for its sustenance; R. Samuel himself had to travel for fundraising purposes. In addition, the Expulsion from Spain of 1492 and the continuing travails that came in its wake still loomed large for contemporary Jews.

One striking element of Uceda's—and other sixteenth century commentators'—work is how far he pushes well-established exegetical techniques. Even before we find him “reading in,” we see a gap between the earlier view of *peshat* and what he accepted as simple readings of texts.

Let us consider, for example, how Uceda assumes a less common, though plausible, meaning for a word, such as in his interpretations of the verb root עמד, which, in the הפעיל (העמידו, make others take the action) form, literally refers to making others stand or to setting them up so that they are able to stand on their own (physically or intellectually).

Uceda sometimes instead reads the verb as “to support financially,” such as when the Members of the Great Assembly urge “והעמידו תלמידים הרבה,” establish many students.”³ Uceda assumes that the Members of the Great Assembly were calling on their fellow-Jews to support many students financially so that they could study Torah.

Uceda's reading is not obviously wrong nor is it necessarily a reading in, since keeping someone going financially is a kind of העמדה, standing them upright, as in the English phrase “putting him (or getting him) back on his feet.” It does, however, turn the text in a different direction from what we have seen, to a greater extent even than the kinds of new definitions we saw among our fifteenth century commentators.

The financial meaning for the root עמד might only work in the הפעיל form,⁴ so Uceda could not use it to explain the Mishnah's statement that God tested Abraham ten times, “רעמד בכולם,” and he עמד in all of them.” Yet Uceda still does not resort to the ordinary reading, that Abraham successfully stood up to, or passed, all the tests.

Instead, he says that the tests improved Abraham, using עמד as if it meant that the tests enabled his fuller worship of God.⁵ These two examples give some sense of how differently Uceda interprets even those texts he was ostensibly reading within the usual boundaries of contextual *peshat*.⁶

In addition to pushing earlier paradigms of interpretation to new extremes, Uceda frequently echoes the readings we saw in haYizhari, Hayyun, and Abarbanel. He records three or four of his own interpretations of each Mishnah, in addition to the welter of prior views he anthologizes, implicitly accepting the multifaceted sense of meaning that we mentioned before. The sheer mass of

Sources of the History of Safed and Its Sages in the 16th Century, pp. 45ff. In *Midrash Shemuel* itself, he mentions his contacts with major kabbalists, such as R. Hayyim Vital, see 4:26, 324, and R. Moshe Cordovero, see 4:28, 335. Note that all page numbers come from the edition of *Midrash Shemuel* printed in block letters in Bene Berak, 1994.

³ 1:1, 7. Uceda makes a point of noting that the Mishnah used the verb העמידו rather than למדו, teach. He is claiming, in other words, that his reading is *more* exact than previous ones because it pays attention to the specific word choice of the Mishnah.

⁴ I thank Prof. Jay Harris for this point.

⁵ 5:3, 353. Note that even if we accept his reading of רעמד, there is a “reading in” element here, since the phrase should have been רעמד מכולם, he was improved *by* them, rather than the current רעמד בכולם, *in* them.

⁶ Definition of words is a continuing issue in Uceda's commentary. He reads some words hyperliterally, as when the Mishnah, 4:8, 277, promises that the body of one who honors the Torah will be honored by “הבריות,” creatures.” Since that can include animals, Uceda asserts, in one interpretation, that even animals will honor that person's body, a supernatural assumption about a fairly ordinary statement. Uceda differentiates between עבדים and משמשים, slaves and servants, a distinction we have not seen before, 1:3, 17-18. He reads the Mishnah that warns against being a רשע בפני עצמך an evildoer in front of yourself (alone), as cautioning readers not to think that sins affect only those who commit them-- the Mishnah means that a sinner should not think that he is an evildoer all alone, since those sins affect others as well, 2:15, 145.

possibilities, presented without any critical judgement, suggests that all were equally acceptable to him, all were aspects of the text worth knowing. Rather than *the* meaning of the text, Uceda was looking for all reasonable ones.⁷

Uceda found richness in the text using the methods we have discussed already. To start, as before, with the letter-prefix *mem* or the word מן, we can point to his reading of the phrase “מעשיו מרובין מחכמתו,” which had always been taken as a comparison, describing a person whose actions are greater than his wisdom, whether in number, quality, or importance. Reading the *mem* as causative, Uceda interprets the phrase as “his actions are greater *because of* his wisdom (i.e., he uses his wisdom to fuel his actions of *mitsvah*).”⁸

Instead of being concerned about the relative emphasis on wisdom or actions, Uceda sees the Mishnah as focusing on ensuring that one’s wisdom is put to practical use, instead of just being an intellectual experience.⁹ This reading is also evidence of Uceda’s willingness to read in, because words like מפני or בגלל, since or because of, would have more plausibly conveyed the message he wanted.

A similar reworking of the word ממנו comes in the phrase “פורק ממנו איבה,” which most simply means that the person avoids having other people hate him. Given the first clause of that Mishnah, ההוסך עצמו מן הדין, he who keeps himself out of court cases, the concluding phrase means that another benefit of avoiding court cases is that the person rids himself of the hatred that either litigious behavior or serving as a judge can arouse.

Uceda, however, explains ממנו as also meaning from within himself. If so, the Mishnah tells us that by avoiding court cases, a person saves himself from being hated by others but also from himself hating them.¹⁰

Like haYizhari, *et. al.*, Uceda offers and defends completely new definitions of words. The Mishnah quotes Hillel’s question “וכשאני לעצמי, מה אני,” and [even] if I am for myself, what am I.”¹¹ Previous readers understood Hillel as rhetorically noting that even people who work assiduously to achieve their goals in study of Torah or service of God cannot achieve enough success to allow for any pride in those accomplishments.

Uceda almost completely reverses the ordinary understanding of Hillel’s comment by re-reading the word מה. He assumes that Hillel’s question alludes to the Biblical verse “מה רב טובך, how great is Your goodness, צפנת ליראיך אשר, that you have set aside for those who fear You.”¹² If

⁷ J. Hacker, “ישראל בגויים בתאורו של ר' שלמה לבית הלוי משלונקי,” *Israel Among the Nations in the Description of R. Solomon of the House of Levi from Salonika* Zion 34 (1969), p. 51, characterizes לב אבות, Solomon Levi’s commentary, who we will briefly discuss below, in the same way.

⁸ 3:12, 196.

⁹ That theme is a traditional one, particularly in discussing Avot 4:5, the different motivations in one’s study of Torah.

¹⁰ See 4:9, 278. Note that this explanation appears in Hayyun as well, 4:9, 200 in Blechrovitz and Kasher’s edition. See also *Midrash Shemuel* 1:7, 33, on the phrase “אל תתיאש מן הפורענות,” which others had read as “do not despair of punishment,” meaning not to give up on the possibility of future retribution. Uceda reads the word מן as “because of,” so that the Mishnah encourages those presently suffering to avoid having that punishment lead to despair. That, too, echoes Hayyun’s reading, 1:7, 91 in Blechrovitz and Kasher. Why Uceda would avoid quoting Hayyun (assuming that he did not happen to independently arrive at the exact same reading on both occasions) requires more detailed analysis and is beyond our present scope.

¹¹ 1:14, 52.

¹² Psalms 31:20.

Hillel's **מה** also means “how great,” the exclamation “**מה אני**” should be rendered “how great am I,” celebrating the great reward awaiting such a person.¹³

Uceda's interpretation ignores the uncomfortable truth that even in Psalms, the word **מה** did not itself mean great; it only supported the word **רב**, which actually does mean “great”. In Avot, Uceda is debatably assuming that **מה** can carry that meaning on its own, not just in conjunction with a word that actually means great.

In the fifth chapter, Avot records a list of ten items that for various reasons did not fit into the rest of Creation, and were therefore created at twilight on the Sixth Day of Creation, just before Shabbat. Uceda's interpretation of **צבת**, tongs provides another example of innovative word interpretation. The first **צבת** had to be created, since there were no existing tongs with which to hold the metal while heating; according to one opinion, those tongs as well were created at twilight on the Sixth Day.

By assuming that the Hebrew word **צבת** has the same root as the Aramaic word **צבי**, desire or wish-- a connection that has no basis other than the similar letters used-- Uceda explains that God included in Nature the power to bring people's positive intentions to fruition.¹⁴

Moving to larger grammatical units, Uceda also regroups the words in sentences to yield radically different meanings. Consider for example the phrase **ודאשתמש בתגא חלף**, which immediately follows a phrase that prays for the death of one who ceases his study of Torah.

Previous commentators generally had read these words as “one who uses the Crown [generally, the Torah] will pass away [referring either to death or a loss of prominence].” In that view, **חלף** (pass away) is a verb, describing what will (or should) happen to the person who uses the Crown inappropriately.

Uceda assumes **חלף** is an adjective, rendering the phrase as “and [also] one who uses an ephemeral Crown.”¹⁵ Having lost a verb in the process—at least as compared to prior interpretation-- he has to interpret this phrase as continuing the earlier one, saying that one who uses this other evanescent Crown (which Uceda identifies as the pleasures of this world), should die, just as one who ceases study of Torah.

The same technique allows a new meaning for the phrase **התקן עצמך ללמוד תורה שאינה ירושה לך**, ordinarily read as “prepare yourself to study Torah, for it is not an inheritance for you.” In

¹³ Again, Hayyun has this interpretation as well, 1:14, 103. Interestingly, though, Hayyun cites a different proof-text, Zechariah 9:17. Later in the commentary, 2:19, 148, Hayyun cites the verse from Psalms in a completely different context. The variation in proof-texts offers the possibility that Uceda was not lifting his ideas directly from Hayyun's. Of course, even if he was, he was still clearly accepting that mode of commentary as authentic.

R. Moses Almosnino, who we will discuss later in the chapter, also has this reading of **מה**, see his **פרקי משה**, eds. Blechrovits and Kasher (Jerusalem, 1969), p. 24. Interestingly, in the same comment Almosnino offers the opposite reading of **מה** as well, which would mean that a person who focuses on his physical body (**עצמי**, my physical essence) is worthless, based on Ecclesiastes 1:3, “**לאדם מה יתרון**,” what profit does a person have...”

¹⁴ See 5:5, 365. For other examples, see 4:4, 265 on **אנוש רמה תקות**, the hope of people is worms, which usually meant that people should not take themselves too seriously, since their hopes and wishes all end in worms (in decay after death). Uceda cites and offers readings of the phrase that see it as saying that people actually long to be eaten by worms. In 4:12, 285 on **הוי ממעט בעסק**, restrict your business pursuits, Uceda assumes that the phrase rests on the belief that those who study Torah most of the time find their work done for them. The Mishnah therefore means “study Torah, so that your work will be completed more easily,” so that one limits one's work indirectly, by studying Torah. Finally, 5:19, 411 on the word **מתקיים**, will last, which Uceda understands to mean that these parties will have other debates as well, in a continuing, lasting fashion.

¹⁵ 1:13, 49.

that reading, the phrase “**ירושה שאינה**” is separate from the first part of the sentence, explaining why the study of Torah needs particular preparation.

Uceda instead assumes that the phrase describes the word Torah, a word that usually refers to the Oral and Written Law, but can also mean a body of knowledge. The phrase then means, “prepare yourself to study that body of knowledge which is not your inheritance”—which Uceda defines as secular knowledge.¹⁶

In that one comment, he has used a lesser meaning of Torah, grouped the words differently, and assumed a completely different topic of discussion, from the need for effort in acquiring sacred knowledge to a recommendation to acquire non-sacred material.¹⁷

Again as in the fifteenth century, Uceda sometimes decides that what others considered the subject of a phrase was actually the object, and vice versa. In an example we saw in *Avot de-Rabi Natan*, Uceda reads **ביתך ויהיו עניים בני**, let the poor be members of your household, as predicting that the members of the household *will* one day be poor, since fortunes change over time; he is reading **ויהיו** as “they will be.” Recognizing that future reality, people should treat the poor well now, in the hopes that their poor descendants will be treated similarly.¹⁸

When the Mishnah characterizes a life that includes both Torah and **דרך ארץ** as “good” (a phrase open to several definitions), it explains that **יגיעת שניהם משכחת עון**, which earlier commentators generally understood to mean that effort in both areas combines to erase thoughts of sin. In that reading, **עון**, sin, is the object of the sentence, the item that is being forgotten. Uceda makes **עון** the subject, so that the clause reads “Torah and **דרך ארץ** work well together, as [only] sin causes forgetting of their toil.”¹⁹

Uceda approaches texts this way even where it produces points of minor interest; this is not, in other words, a technique used only when he wishes to promote a particular agenda. Rather, he saw these techniques as part of how one mined the classical text.

One commentator does not a cultural shift make; despite Uceda’s popularity and influence, we could not use him alone to characterize Avot exegesis after Abarbanel. We turn, therefore, to three of his predecessors whom Uceda quotes often. They will help confirm that the sixteenth century had absorbed what the fifteenth had wrought.

R. JOSEPH ALASHQAR

R. Joseph Alashqar wrote a commentary on Avot entitled **מרכבת המשנה** that Uceda cites relatively frequently, mistakenly attributing it to Alashqar’s older (and more renowned) cousin, R. Moses Alashqar.²⁰ The younger Alashqar fled the Spanish Expulsion as a boy (making him a younger contemporary of Abarbanel’s), moved to Tlemcen (Algeria) where he studied with R. Shlomo al-Khallas, and eventually became a rabbi and influential communal leader. His commentary displays

¹⁶ 2:14, 141.

¹⁷ This statement obviously has important ideological overtones, especially considering Yavets’ pointing to secular knowledge as one of the causes of the Expulsion from Spain. This section of our chapter, however, is focusing on exegesis, to prove that haYizhari, Hayyun, and Abarbanel, were not exceptions but the first examples of a new rule. In addition, secular knowledge does not show up often enough in *Midrash Shemuel* for us to gauge Uceda’s commitment to it. Finally, this provides yet one more example of the freedom this exegesis gives commentators in assuming that their own worldview is supported by classical texts.

¹⁸ 1:5, 24. *Lev Avot* also turned the members of the household into the subject, see below.

¹⁹ 2:2, 79. See also 1:3, 19 (on **ויהי מורא שמים עליכם**, the fear of Heaven will be upon you, which Uceda reads to mean that the fear will be on (or emanate from) the person, instilling such fear in others; 2:8, 111, where **מרבה עצה**, means “giving advice to many others”, rather than the usual reading of consults often with others; and 2:12, 130 and 4:15, 293, where the phrases **כבוד חברך** and **כבוד תלמידך** (the honor of your friend and of your student) are read as “the honor given you by” your friend and your student.

²⁰ See M. Amar’s introduction, pp. 17-19 and Y. Spiegel’s introduction, p. 3-8, in Y.S. Spiegel, ed. **מרכבת המשנה** (Jerusalem, 1993).

many of the same innovations in textual reading and thematic content as we saw in Abarbanel, although the extent of his contact with the earlier scholar is unclear.²¹

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Alashqar's commentary, one we have not seen in the other commentators we have studied, is his assuming that earlier Mishnayot guide the interpretation of later *unconnected* ones. For example, the first Mishnah in the tractate lists the chain of tradition from Moses until the Men of the Great Assembly, and then reads "they articulated three principles--be temperate in judgement, establish many students, and make a protective fence around the Torah."

Since the Men of the Great Assembly were the closest antecedent to the pronoun "they," commentators generally assumed that these rules were their contribution to Jewish thought. Just as a point of interest, Alashqar believed that each part of the statement was the advice of a different one of the preceding generations. In his scheme, Joshua told the Elders to be temperate in judgement, the Elders told the Prophets to establish many students, and the Prophets told the Members of the Great Assembly to make a fence around the Torah.²²

Coming to the exegetical innovation that drew our attention, Alashqar also assumes that those principles—temperance in judgement, establishing students, and judging others meritoriously--underlie later statements in the Mishnah, ones that seem to be both more general and completely disconnected from the current one.

For example, when R. Judah the Prince, in the second chapter,²³ declares that people can avoid sin by remembering three factors-- the Eye that Sees, the Ear that Hears, and that all our deeds are recorded in the book-- Alashqar brings in the earlier Mishnah as the reference point. The Eye, in his reading, means that God cares about proper judgement,²⁴ the Ear emphasizes God's interest in producing new students (so that God Himself comes to listen), and the book rewards those who observe the boundaries protecting the Torah.²⁵ The earlier generations' collected wisdom thus became a theme in Alashqar's reading of the later rabbi's views.

He also views the Ten Commandments as pervading God's relationship with the Jewish people. The Mishnah states that the Jews experienced ten miracles in Egypt, ten at the Sea, and lists ten miracles that happened continually in the Temple. Alashqar believes each of those tens were in anticipation of, or in reward for, the Jews' acceptance of the Ten Commandments.²⁶ He did not detail as elaborate or complete a structure for each chapter as Abarbanel, but his view that some Mishnayot provided the correct context to understand others-- even in different chapters--in one way ascribes more structure than we saw in earlier readings.

²¹ Alashqar does sometimes echo Abarbanel, see for example the comment quoted in his name in *Midrash Shemuel* 4:28, 337. He also echoes Yavets on occasion, see 4:13, 290, and 4:18, 302. Spiegel, *ibid*, p. 26 thinks Alashqar had both commentaries, but recognizes the possibility that he had not seen them directly. All references to Alashqar in this section give the page numbers where the comment is quoted by *Midrash Shemuel*.

²² 1:1, 8.

²³ I note this because it goes even farther than Abarbanel, who only assumed a central topic or structure within a chapter.

²⁴ In contrast to the simplest meaning, that the Eye sees our actions, so we should be careful to act in a way pleasing to God.

²⁵ 2:1, 75. See also 1:16, 60, and 2:14, 138, where he likewise lines up a later set of statements with those original three.

²⁶ 5:3, 356, 5:4, 363. See also 3:14, 200, where the Mishnah discourages sleeping in the morning, imbibing wine at noon, and sitting with ignoramuses in their study halls, each easily seen as personal problems. Alashqar instead interprets them, respectively, as a reference to youth, middle, and old age, so the Mishnah actually warns people to repent their sins at all stages of life. This example reads a fairly narrow and self-contained Mishnah as articulating a life principle, the kind of broad reading we saw in Abarbanel.

Alashqar also engaged in creative wordplay. In an example we have already seen, he repeats Hayyun's reading of "עשה לך רב", make for yourself a rabbi," as make yourself a rabbi (עשה עצמך רב).²⁷

He makes two surprising assumptions in order to interpret "איזהו עשיר? השמח בחלקו", Who is rich? He who is happy with his lot" as "he who performs *mitsvot* with his money."²⁸ First, he reads חלקו, which literally means his part, share, or lot, as speaking of financial resources in particular. Second, he takes the word השמח, which means one who is happy, to mean one who creates happiness (by performing *mitsvot*), a meaning that would have been better conveyed by the word המשמח.²⁹

Regardless of their plausibility, these readings make it clear that Alashqar should be grouped with Abarbanel, *Midrash Shemuel*, and those like them, rather than with Rashi and Maimonides.

R. MOSES ALMOsnino

R. Moses Almosnino (1518-1580) was a descendant of Spanish exiles who served as the leader of a community in Salonika. In his communal capacities, he notably joined a delegation that went to Constantinople, the seat of the Ottoman Empire, to argue for the continuation of certain privileges for the Jewish community. While home, he was a preacher and thinker of great repute.³⁰

Many of Almosnino's interpretations echo either the substance or the technique of ones we have already seen. To pick a few examples from the first chapter, he offers three readings of the phrase "יהי ביתך בית ועד לחכמים", let your house be a meeting place for Sages."³¹ The first simply tells us why it is important to have one's house be such; since the need to learn is constant, as opposed to other endeavors of more limited value, having the house become a meeting-place will help the homeowner learn all the time.

His second and third readings remind us more of Abarbanel and Uceda. He suggests that the Mishnah is urging constant study of Torah, which will naturally lead to the home becoming a meeting-place for Sages (since such people will want to associate with a person who is always studying Torah). Here, Almosnino is even more radical than others we have seen, since his reading assumes —without a *vav* to indicate that this is a result— that the Mishnah is describing a result of a tacit command. The יהי here does not mean, "make it," but means "act in such a way that it will happen so."

The third reading, that Avot was telling Jews to make the House of Study their home by going there often, reminds us of Uceda's questioning which part of a phrase was the subject and which the object. Instead of Yose b. Yoezer telling Jews how to treat their own homes, Almosnino sees him as telling them how to treat the House of Study, to make it home by their presence there.³²

²⁷ 1:16, p. 59-60. Hayyun's reading appears on p. 106 of his commentary, as we noted in the first chapter, text at note 23.

²⁸ 4:1, 255.

²⁹ For one final example, 5:3, 356 refers to ten trials God imposed on Abraham, using the Hebrew word נסיון, usually a test or trial. As we saw, Abarbanel echoed Maimonides in translating the word as demonstrate. Alashqar instead reads it as accustom, meaning that Abraham's experiences were God's way of accustoming the Patriarch to His service. This reading serves a theological purpose, explaining why God subjected Abraham to tests despite knowing their result, but it also breaks significant new exegetical ground.

³⁰ For the most recent study of Almosnino, see M. Benayah, *Moshe Almosnino of Salonika, His Activities and Works* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv U.: Tel Aviv, 1996). The biographical summary appears on pp. 13-26.

³¹ פרקי משה, pp. 11-12.

³² Uceda cites this third reading, p. 23.

Later in that same Mishnah, Yose b. Yoezer recommends drinking בצמא, thirstily, of the words of the Sages. Almosnino explains that he was warning listeners not to take too much in at once; people who drink too quickly lose their thirst. Instead of recommending enthusiasm in study, Almosnino sees the word as ordaining a continuing balance, a need to safeguard that excitement by limiting one's exposure to new material until prepared for it.

The next Mishnah also offered ample opportunities for Almosnino to demonstrate his sixteenth-century credentials. The Mishnah, to recall, cites Yose b. Yohanan's advice to keep one's house wide open, and to have the poor be members of the household.

Almosnino first suggests that the *vav* of ויהי indicates a result, an assumption about a *vav* that we have seen before. He notes that rich people feel comfortable entering a house as a guest even if the door is not wide open. The poor, however, will only be willing to go in if they are sure they are invited, an invitation signaled by having the house wide open.

His second interpretation, also following roads we have walked with other commentators, assumes that בני ביתך is the subject of the sentence, which he takes to mean the servants. Keeping one's servants poor will insure that they retain their sympathy for the actual poor, and thus help their master properly treat those who seek his help.

One more noteworthy way in which Almosnino echoes Abarbanel, supporting the claim that this mode of exegesis had become part of the ordinary for the sixteenth century, is that he closes each chapter by recapping how each paragraph contributes to the overall centralized discussion.³³

Aside from imitating those who came before, Almosnino shows marked creativity in his careful attention to the literal nuances of words that others had not stressed. His careful attention to each aspect of a word fits well with the midrashic sense of omnisignificance that we spoke of in the introduction.

For example, Almosnino questioned the Mishnah's expression דע מה שתשיב לאפיקורוס, "know what to say to a heretic," claiming that the words דע להשיב, know *how* to respond, would have conveyed the message more clearly.³⁴ With the simplest meaning excluded, he asserts that the text meant that Jews should actually know and understand their responses to heretics, not simply memorize them.

The phrase יראת חטא provides a similar opportunity for creative interpretation. The Mishnah refers to a person whose "fear of sin exceeds his wisdom," using the words יראת חטא for "fear of sin."³⁵ Almosnino notes that those words literally mean "fear of *his* sin"; had the Mishnah really meant to refer to the person's own fear of sin, Almosnino adds, it should have said יראתו מן החטא. The Mishnah's phrase indicates that a person needs to have actually sinned, which then arouses fear of backsliding, to be characterized as one whose fear of (specific personal) sins outweighs his or her wisdom.

The presence or absence of verbs opened possibilities for insight as well. Almosnino notes that the first Mishnah in Avot refers to the passage of tradition from one generation to the next in three different ways. It either mentions that the earlier generation's leader transmitted the Torah to the next, that the new leader received it, or does not use a verb at all. Thus, Moses *received* the Torah from Sinai, *transmitted* it to Joshua, and Joshua (*no verb*) to the elders.

Almosnino explains that the Mishnah attaches the verb to the main actor in each situation; Moses figured essentially in the reception from Sinai and in the transmission to Joshua, so the verb refers to him. Joshua and the elders, on the other hand, interacted on equal levels, so no verb was

³³ See pp. 29, 66, 112, 168, and 222. Note that in the first chapter, Almosnino sees the three recommendations of the Men of the Great Assembly as guiding the rest of the discussion, a factor we also noted in Alashqar.

³⁴ 2:16, 48.

³⁵ 3:11, 195.

included.³⁶ In all of these cases, the plausibility of the interpretation is less important than noting the care with each piece of the text. That care, whether or not it leads to “reading in,” already shows a shift to treating a text Biblically.

A similarly exact reading of a verb appears where the Mishnah says “אל תתחבר לרשע,” generally taken to proscribe developing a friendship with an evildoer. Almosnino, however, notes that the verb form of *תתחבר* implies that the person being addressed initiates the relationship. He therefore infers that the Mishnah only prohibits *initiating* a friendship with an evildoer; if the evildoer takes the first step, the friendship would be permitted.³⁷

As a final example of inference through careful reading, we can note the two oddities Almosnino points out in the Mishnah’s report that “ten miracles were performed for the Jews in Egypt and at the Sea.” First, the Mishnah uses a passive rather than an active verb—“were performed” instead of “God performed.” In addition, the Mishnah does not list the miracles, as it does with those that occurred regularly in the Temple.

Almosnino suggests that the miracles were in fact passive, since they consisted only of the Jews’ being saved from the plagues with which God was smiting the Egyptians. Had God actually performed separate miracles for the Jews, the Mishnah would have referred to Him explicitly.³⁸

In his awareness of structure, recording and applying creative exegesis, and his careful focus on exact phraseology as an avenue to novel insight, Almosnino adds one more name to the panoply of commentators who adopted haYizhari, Hayyun, and Abarbanel’s exegetical methodology.

R. SOLOMON LEVI’S LEV AVOT

R. Solomon Levi (1531/2—1600) wrote *Lev Avot* only a little before Uceda wrote *Midrash Shemuel*. His work thus provides a good basis of comparison with Uceda’s, and offers clinching proof that Uceda was more typical than innovative in his surprising exegeses.

A member of a wealthy family of exiles from Portugal, R. Solomon was an author, preacher, and, eventually, rabbi to two of Salonika’s Jewish communities.³⁹ As we saw with Uceda and Almosnino, *Lev Avot* ascribes significance to the particular structure and wording of the Mishnah in a way more commonly associated with the study of Bible before the fifteenth century.

When R. Haninah judges two people by whether they include discussions of Torah in their conversation, he envisions the issue as a yes or no proposition. Without Torah, the two constitute a *מושב לצים*, a gathering of idlers, but with Torah (apparently any Torah, since he does not refer to an amount), the Divine Presence joins them.

Lev Avot points out, as earlier commentators had not, that the Mishnah implicitly rules out any neutral way for two people to sit together; they will have to be either a *מושב לצים* or merit a visitation from God.⁴⁰

His interest in a middle option, denied in the case of two people sitting together, arises again when the Mishnah uses a metaphor of ink on paper for learning. Learning when young, according to the Mishnah, is like ink written on new paper, whereas in old age it becomes like writing on paper that has previously been erased.

³⁶ 1:1, 6.

³⁷ 1:7, 33-4. Almosnino rationalizes this by suggesting that when a person attempts to befriend someone, he makes himself subordinate to the other, which is prohibited with regard to an evildoer. If, however, it is the evildoer who submits, the friendship should be allowed, since it might lead the evildoer to repent his ways.

³⁸ 5:3, 359. See also 4:28, 341, where Almosnino focuses on the difference between *הילודים למות*, those born will die, and *המתים להחיות*, those who die will be resurrected. In the former phrasing, no actor is involved, whereas the latter verb assumes an instigator of the resurrection. Almosnino explains that the first is natural while the second is supernatural, and therefore needs an actor.

³⁹ See J. Hacker’s article, *משלונקי ישראל בגויים בתאורו של ר' שלמה לבית הלוי*, *Israel Among the Nations in the Description of R. Solomon of the House of Levi from Salonika*” *Zion* 34 (1969), above, note 7.

⁴⁰ 3:3, 170.

Paper that has been erased, *Lev Avot* informs us, has two weaknesses. It holds ink less well (which he takes as a metaphor for the greater difficulty of absorbing information in old age) and is not easily read (meaning that a person who learns when old will not have the time to transmit that knowledge to others).

The dual weakness of erased paper (and its metaphoric parallel to old age) leaves open a middle option, learning in middle age. At that point, absorbing knowledge would still be easy, but there would be limited time to teach others, so that metaphorically the paper would be less legible than new.⁴¹

In addition to his alertness to the middle category, *Lev Avot* reads single words hyperliterally to find creative interpretations. For example, R. Solomon questions the applicability of the verb “to return (שוב)” for repentance for an individual, found both in Avot and in the Bible itself,⁴² since perhaps this person never had a relationship with God to which he could return.⁴³ He answers that all humans in their youth wished to act only in ways pleasing to God; when we repent, therefore, we are all indeed returning to our original blessed state.

Here, the word is taken in its literal sense, where prior readers had generally assumed its well-established figurative meaning, taking it for granted that the verb שׁוּב in that context simply means the act of foregoing sin and seeking God’s forgiveness. That literal reading also leads to an undefended, and questionable, view of people’s natures when younger.

Tenses of verbs provided further opportunities for *Lev Avot*’s literalism. When the Mishnah demands that people pray for the government, *Lev Avot* notes that it uses a present perfect tense (הָיָה מְתַפַּלֵּל) instead of a simple present tense (הַתַּפַּלֵּל). Rather than meaning “pray for the government,” the phrase more literally means, “be in a constant state of praying for the government.” Taking that distinction seriously, *Lev Avot* decides that the Mishnah means we should always, on every occasion of communal prayer, include a prayer for the government.⁴⁴

Besides expanding ordinary exegetical techniques, R. Solomon Levi, too, interprets Avot in ways more known within the realm of Bible study and Midrash. One example of a common technique, defining words in completely new ways, comes when the Mishnah recommends minimizing one’s “עֵסֶק” and busying oneself with Torah.⁴⁵ Literally, עֵסֶק means involvement, and is generally thought of as referring to business, so that the Mishnah seems to be urging people to limit their business lives in favor of involvement with Torah.

Lev Avot instead believes the “involvement” referred to is the fanfare that surrounds Torah scholars because of their accomplishments; the Mishnah warns them to avoid that, and concentrate on Torah.

While that interpretation perhaps only explains a word in an unnecessarily complex or restricted way, two other comments show how far from literal interpretation he was prepared to venture. When the Mishnah orders readers to “drink thirstily (בְּצִמָּא)” the words of the Sages, *Lev Avot* interprets צִמָּא, a word that clearly means thirst, as youth.⁴⁶

⁴¹ 4:24, 319.

⁴² In Avot, see 2:12, 133; in the Bible, see Deuteronomy 4:30 and 30:2.

⁴³ He presumably means that in addressing the entire Jewish people, the verb of return is clearly appropriate because of their historical relationship; in the case of an individual, however, he is not sure as to why the verb has been used.

⁴⁴ 3:2, 166.

⁴⁵ 4:12, 287.

⁴⁶ 1:4, 22. He says that when people are young they are more anxious to learn, an interest that can metaphorically be called a thirst. Note that each of these texts was also interpreted radically, although differently, by Almosnino, as discussed above.

This reading puts aside the plain meaning of the text, a call for excitement and interest in listening to Sages, in favor of seeing it as a discussion of *when* one will best learn from them. Youth, when a person has the greatest interest in gathering knowledge, becomes the new meaning of צמא.

Another example of far-from-literal interpretation helps *Lev Avot* stress the importance of study of Torah. The Mishnah warns people to be careful about study, for “שגגת תלמוד עולה זדון” mistakes in study are accounted as purposeful.⁴⁷ In the general interpretation, the Mishnah means that careless errors in the study of Torah will be construed as intentional, since they can lead to erroneous legal conclusions. *Lev Avot*, however, translates the phrase as “the sins of ignorance that result from one’s neglect of learning [שגגת תלמוד] eventually lead [עולה] to purposeful transgressions [זדון].”

His interpretation reads two words in the phrase differently from previously. First, שגגת תלמוד generally meant errors arising *during* one’s study; *Lev Avot* read it as errors stemming from a *lack* of study, so the word תלמוד means the activity of study (or its lack). Second, *Lev Avot* construes עולה, which literally means “rises”, and was previously taken as “is accounted as,” as “turns into” or “becomes,” which the Mishnah might have better said using the word “נעשה,” or at least by making the phrase “להיות זדון עולה” turns into deliberate [transgressions].”

For examples of *Lev Avot* taking particles of speech differently from before, we return, as with Almosnino, to the Mishnah that declares “ויהיו עניים בני ביתך” and let the poor be members of your household.” He, too, sees the word עניים, the poor, as an adjective, rather than the subject of the sentence.⁴⁸ As a result, instead of the Mishnah discussing how to treat the poor (making them feel like members of the household), or even (as in Uceda) a prediction, *Lev Avot* believes it tells Jews to let their own family be poor, freeing up funds for greater support of others.

STRETCHING AVOT: NEW THEMES IN UCEDA AND SOLOMON LEVI

If all of the new exegesis we have recorded only went to producing a thematically similar reading of Avot—finding the same ideas in new ways—it might be only a curiosity. Uceda and *Lev Avot* help us show that the shift in exegesis widened the scope of ideas readers could find in Avot as well.

Uceda’s view of study of Torah offers a good example of the kind of qualitative change we mean. Earlier authors had obviously recognized Avot’s interest in the topic, but they had focused on such issues as whether Torah was best (or necessarily) studied with a teacher, whether one could accept remuneration for teaching Torah, the continuing challenge of mastering a forbiddingly large corpus, and the role of creativity in studying Torah.

Uceda repeatedly raises the question of the impact of both natural talent and Divine assistance on successful study, often in the context of discussing those with and without intellectual abilities. On the talent side, he repeatedly reminds such people to recognize it as a gift from God rather than a source of personal pride.⁴⁹

When the Mishnah warns those who have studied a great deal of Torah against taking pride in their accomplishment “כי לכך נוצרת” for it was for that that you were created,⁵⁰ the text most simply means that Jews were created to study Torah. Even the most accomplished scholar was only fulfilling God’s mandate for every member of the Jewish people, not engaging in any especially meritorious conduct.

⁴⁷ 4:16, 297.

⁴⁸ 1:5, 24.

⁴⁹ Uceda’s emphasis on novel insight, which we discuss in the next chapter, might have heightened his awareness of the gap between intellectual haves and have-nots. Brute effort can eventually produce comprehension and retention, but creativity is less amenable to effort and more dependent on God-given talent. It may be, then, that Uceda’s comments on that divide stemmed from this element of his intellectual life.

⁵⁰ 2:9.

Uceda, however, reads the words **כִּי לֵכָךְ נִוצַרְתָּ** as directed specifically at the most successful scholars. Since the talents that allowed for so much study come from God, those accomplishments must have been His intended purpose in granting them to this person. Using one's talents in the way God wished and seeing their positive outcome, should lead to feelings of gratitude, not pride.⁵¹

For those not so talented intellectually, Uceda suggests that when the Mishnah says "it is not for you to finish the work," it reminds such people that they need not worry that they are required to achieve great knowledge of Torah-- effort counts more than results.⁵²

One more example of Uceda's awareness of the unintelligent comes in his interpretation of the words "prepare yourself to study Torah, for it is not an inheritance for you."⁵³ Watching more talented people easily acquire knowledge and understanding of Torah might lead the unintelligent to feel excluded, as if Torah were an inheritance for the intelligentsia. Therefore, Uceda says, the Mishnah stresses that working at the study of Torah will eventually lead to some success, even for one for whom it is not an inheritance.⁵⁴

In another departure from the discussions of the study of Torah we have seen, Uceda regularly assumes that kabbalah is a necessary part of that study. This may not be surprising for a sixteenth century resident of Safed, a student of R. Isaac Luria (the "**אֲרִי הַקָּדוֹשׁ**", the Holy Lion"), and a colleague of both R. Hayyim Vital and R. Moshe Cordovero, but it is new to Avot commentary as we have seen it thus far.

When the Mishnah notes that a wise man answers "first things first, and later things later," Uceda reads that as meaning that people should progress from the obvious (the "first things") to the hidden in their study of Torah.⁵⁵ He also interprets a verse from Psalms that refers to **הַכְמָה** (wisdom), **מִשְׁפָּט** (law), and **תּוֹרַת אֱלֹהִים** (either his God's Torah or the study of the Divine) as suggesting that one study Talmud, Maimonides, and kabbalah each day.⁵⁶

Aside from the surprise inclusion of kabbalah in the ordinary curriculum, Uceda also mentions basic kabbalistic concepts, such as **גִּלְגּוּל** (reincarnation),⁵⁷ **קְלִיפּוֹת** (the kabbalistic term for

⁵¹ P. 112. Another example of Uceda's view that ability and therefore accomplishments in study of Torah are a gift from God comes in one of his readings of 2:17, 159, where the Mishnah notes that people are not required to "complete the work," often thought of as study of Torah. *Midrash Shemuel* explains that people are only responsible for making an initial effort in study of Torah, after which Divine assistance eases the process. Even so, those who do study receive reward as if God had not helped at all. See also 3:20, 220, and 4:18, 302.

⁵² 2:17, 156. *Midrash Shemuel* actually refers to **טִפְשִׁים**, stupid people, a much less delicate term than we are using in the text. See also 5:24, p. 436, on **לְפֻנֵּם צִעְרָא אֲגָרָא**, reward is according to effort and 4:1, 249, where he suggests that Ben Zoma's recommendation to learn from everyone was a way to circumvent one's own lack of talent.

⁵³ 2:14, 140.

⁵⁴ The point, apparently, is that talent matters less than the way people use their gifts to further their religious growth. For a clear exposition of this notion, see his explanations of 5:15, 397-8.

⁵⁵ 5:6, 375. Note that the Mishnah spoke of answering, which could have been a comment on how to structure conversations in general. Uceda took it as a recommendation of how to structure one's Torah study.

⁵⁶ 2:5, 94, interpreting Psalms 37:30-31. The comment seems particularly important in light of the curricular claims of some kabbalists, see M. Halbertal, *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning, and Authority* (Harvard U. Press: Cambridge, 1997), p. 119-20, and the literature cited there.

⁵⁷ See 2:7, 104, where reincarnation explains the apparently incorrect Mishnaic statement that murderers will end up being murdered; 4:28, 336, where the Mishnah warns against thinking of burial as a refuge from punishment, which Uceda reads as meaning that some people will have to live through many reincarnations before they find eternal rest; and 5:2, 352, where he explains that God indeed brought the waters of the Flood on all of the ten preceding generations, since the souls of all those generations had been reincarnated in Noah's time. He cites the traditional Sages as well as Pythagoras to defend the idea.

“broken,” meaning not yet perfected, aspects of Creation),⁵⁸ and צירוף אותיות (combining letters in a manner that approximates Creation).⁵⁹

In each case, Uceda simply uses the relevant concept to explain the Mishnah, and makes no surprising exegetical leaps.⁶⁰ It does, however, alter the worldview to be found in Avot considerably. Of course, this may simply show how kabbalah had worked its way into everyday discourse at this time, but the fluidity of meaning we have seen before seems to have paved the way for this development.

If the themes seen so far are not surprising enough to convince us that Avot became more thematically malleable as it became more exegetically elastic, Uceda’s overwhelming interest in questions of suffering and prosperity should prove the point. His interest in the topic itself is not surprising, as the Expulsion still cast its shadow over the descendants of those who had fled.

Yet Uceda raises the topic more frequently than do others who suffered as well, such as Maimonides and Duran, who both had to flee Spain in the face of religious persecution. In addition, the range of attitudes and strategies regarding suffering that Uceda offers confirm that it was a pressing reality in his thought.

On one level, Uceda simply demands obedience and faith in God regardless of the questions raised by suffering. He warns readers to fulfill God’s will despite יסורים, sufferings, severe enough to lead a person to long for death.⁶¹ Going one step further, he demands an unwavering faith commitment, urging people to admit the justice of such sufferings.⁶² His insistence on faith is so strong that he prohibits questioning issues of theodicy, labeling such thoughts חילול ה' בצנעה, private desecrations of the Name of God.⁶³

Despite that prohibition, he offers a range of justifications for the sufferings of the righteous, although all of his ideas had been suggested before.⁶⁴ He notes that some of what we call punishment is actually the “natural” retribution for sin, so that we should not ascribe those results

⁵⁸ 3:15, explaining that one who mistreats קדשים, sanctified objects, loses his share in the World to Come because he takes holy matter and gives it to the קליפות; 5:3, 357, where Uceda assumes the Mishnah refers to the Jews testing “the מקום קליפות” (the Omnipresent aspect of God) in the desert, because it is a place ruled by the קליפות; 5:5, 367, where he thinks that the objects created at twilight on Friday were affected by Adam’s sin, which brought קליפות to the world.

⁵⁹ 3:20, 219, explaining why Torah is appropriately thought of as כלי חמדה, a desirable vessel. The issue of combining letters, however, we already saw in Duran.

⁶⁰ A more kabbalistic commentary, written around the same time as Uceda’s, is that of R. Abraham Galante, published in a volume called מגן אבות. The commentary had little impact on later writers, and uses the text largely for letter and word combinations, finding meanings that have almost no identifiable connection to the text’s apparent intent. By the 18th century, such exegesis had become more widespread, as evidenced by the commentaries of Azulai (published in the same volume) and the Maggid of Kozhnitz.

⁶¹ 1:7, 33 and 3:16, 207-208. See 4:4, 265, where he interprets the phrase תקוות אנוש רמה (literally, the hopes of men are like worms, meaning come to very little other than death), as meaning that אנוש, people suffering יסורים, long for death.

⁶² 5:6, 376.

⁶³ 4:19, 305, and 4:5, 270, where the text claims that such private desecration will be punished publicly. Uceda fears that public punishment without obvious cause will only fuel further speculation about God’s justice. He therefore asserts that punishment will actually occur privately, twisting the text to reflect that meaning, but directly contradicting its simplest reading.

⁶⁴ See Y. Blau, “Annotated Bibliography to the Problem of Evil” in S. Carmy, ed. *Jewish Perspectives on the Experience of Suffering* (Aronson: Northvale, NJ, 1999), pp. 334-336. For a lengthier study, see O. Leaman, *Evil and Suffering in Jewish Philosophy* (Cambridge U. Press: Cambridge, 1995).

directly to God.⁶⁵ Elsewhere he says that God brings suffering to spur people to fulfillment of the Torah, implying that not all suffering is a punishment.⁶⁶ Third, he notes that true reward comes in the next world, which explains why justice in this world is reversed: righteous people receive their punishment here to allow for pure reward in the next, and vice versa for evil people.⁶⁷

Perhaps underlying all of his claims, he twice notes God's great kindness to humans, suggesting that we can never question God's justice, since the many kindnesses that sustain the world easily outweigh whatever injustices we perceive.⁶⁸

As we mentioned, all of these issues had been raised before, even by the authors we studied earlier. They had not, however, seen Avot as the place for lengthy or frequent expositions of the topic. Some of Avot certainly deals with theodicy, but Uceda finds it repeatedly, seeing almost twenty percent of the Mishnayot in Avot as discussing that and related topics. For Uceda, Avot was open to the commentator's agenda, rather than a work to be interpreted for its own messages.

LEV AVOT ON TEACHING

As before, *Lev Avot* will help us confirm that Uceda was not an anomaly. Although there are several examples, we will focus only on his surprising emphasis on teaching, an issue with clearly contemporary overtones. A Mishnah that we have already examined⁶⁹ warns “אם למדת תורה הרבה, אם לעצמך אל תחזיק טובה לעצמך, כי לכך נוצרת אל” generally translated as “if you have studied a great deal of Torah, do not consider it a merit, for it was for that that you were created.”⁷⁰

Lev Avot instead translates the Mishnah as saying that one may not teach students in order to gain the increased understanding that accrues from presenting ideas to others. Since people were created to teach others, he says, they cannot teach with any purpose other than fulfilling their intended role in the world.

Three surprising insights are bundled in this one Mishnah. First, *Lev Avot* is the first commentator we have seen to read the verb למדת, studied, as לימדת, taught others, although the two can be spelled the same way. Second, previous readers had assumed the phrase אל תחזיק טובה לעצמך was an idiomatic way of saying “do not see it as a merit of yours.” *Lev Avot* translates תחזיק more literally, to hold, which frees the word טובה to refer to an actual good, the added understanding that results from teaching others. Finally, and perhaps most surprisingly, *Lev Avot* assumes people were created in order to teach Torah to others.

Another Mishnah weighs knowledge against actions, saying that if one's actions are prior to his wisdom (an unclear term, previously taken to refer to either chronological or value priority) the wisdom will endure. *Lev Avot* translates the word, מתקיים, will endure, as “others will listen and pay attention.”⁷¹ Wisdom that endures, in his view, was wisdom other people would listen to and absorb.

A Mishnah that apparently discusses rulings of Jewish law allows him another chance to stress teaching; at the same time, it provides a clue as to the source of his concern. He understands the phrase מורים בתורה שלא כהלכה, people who treat or interpret Torah inappropriately, as referring to judges who teach litigants arguments they *could* use successfully in court, but should not.⁷² By

⁶⁵ 2:11, 125, 4:1, 253, and 5:7, 379. In different ways, each source shows him that suffering comes to the world as a direct result of sin, without God's actions at all.

⁶⁶ 2:17, 151-2 and 3:22, 233.

⁶⁷ 2:17, 151-2, 3:21, 226-7, and 4:2, 261.

⁶⁸ 2:9, 112 and 3:22, 229.

⁶⁹ See above, text at note 47, where Uceda believed it was only the talented students who were created specifically to study Torah.

⁷⁰ 2:9. *Lev Avot's* comments are cited on p. 114.

⁷¹ 3:12, 198.

⁷² 5:9, 384.

reading מורים as teaching (instead of the more usual rendering of it as ruling), he has converted a discussion of inappropriate legal decisions into a question of improper teaching.

The specific example of an inappropriate claim that *Lev Avot* cites suggests that he was sensitive to the lack of an authoritative tradition, a lack that could also fuel a concern with remedying that lack by teaching. He mentions that the judge might teach a litigant that he can say קים לי, a legal principle that allows a person to adhere to a minority legal opinion, not generally followed.

In such a situation, courts will not force the litigant to follow the general view, meaning they will not extract money from that litigant. The problems in law enforcement created by conflicting opinions seem to have weighed on R. Solomon's mind.

In the first chapter, *Lev Avot* notes that after the generation of Hillel and Shammai, the Mishnah stops referring to each generation as having received the tradition from the preceding one. He explains, based on the Talmud, that it was at that point that the original tradition from Sinai was lost and the effort of the rabbis was necessary to help recreate it.⁷³

Considering the post-Expulsion timing of *Lev Avot's* commentary, it seems likely that he saw a parallel between the precarious state of the Oral Tradition in the time of the Mishnah and tradition in his own time. In a world where tradition had been lost, and could only be reliably recreated under the guidance of teachers, their central importance is clear.

Seeing Uceda and *Lev Avot* express themes and ideas that have no obvious relevance to the text in question proves the second part of our contention. Not only was the change in exegesis a lasting one, leaving its mark on later important works in the study of Avot, it was one that brought along with it a remarkably broader set of ideas and themes that an exegete could assume rested in the layers of meaning of the tractate. In the next chapter, we turn to the difficult and somewhat speculative task of identifying the factors that contributed to this development.

⁷³ 1:16, 58. His comment relies on *Tosefta Sanhedrin* 7:1, which says that the students of Hillel and Shammai did not serve their teachers properly, which led to many disputes within the Jewish people.

CHAPTER FOUR: FACTORS OF CHANGE

We now come to the part of this study least amenable to definite statements. Having shown how Avot exegesis changed in the fifteenth century, we need to try to understand the factors that precipitated that shift. Unfortunately, clear-cut answers will likely elude us, for two reasons.

First, the authors in question did not manifest any awareness of the difference between their hermeneutic and earlier ones; they therefore do not address the issue directly, robbing us of their perspective about the change. Second, those authors may not even have been aware of what they had done, as changes in hermeneutical assumptions often happen subconsciously rather than knowingly or deliberately. In trying to identify the causes of this change, we will be trying to reconstruct the underlying factors that shaped these authors' way of thinking about texts, a delicate and perhaps quixotic task.

Instead of suggesting a single factor to explain this development, we will mention four factors, each of which we see as having contributed to that change. These three authors' central commentarial endeavors having focused on Biblical texts, the rise in Christian polemics against the Talmud, the Talmudic hermeneutic of R. Isaac Kanpanton, and Renaissance trends, to varying degrees, all offer some insight into the development of haYizhari, Hayyun, and Abarbanel's Avot exegesis.

After discussing how each of these factors relates to the new mode of reading Avot, we will, in the next and concluding chapter, offer a narrative for how this change occurred, and discuss the ramifications of this mixed picture for Jewish intellectual and cultural history.

DISCIPLINE SEEPAGE

Although we have been discussing HaYizhari, Hayyun, and Abarbanel as readers of Avot, at this point it is worth our while to remember that each of these authors' main written endeavors were Biblical commentaries. That Biblical grounding might have led them to read Avot as they would have read Scripture.

Rather than a well-planned decision to change from traditional exegesis, the change in Avot that we have noted might be an example of carrying the rules of one discipline into another. As they came to a new text, they may simply have read that text as they would read the other texts they were more accustomed to interpreting, unwittingly using exegetical techniques that were not previously applied here.

Even if that does not fully describe what occurred, certainly the Biblical focus of these authors should be seen as one important element in this development. Of course, earlier Avot commentators had also worked at Biblical interpretation. Rashi's interpretation of almost all of Scripture, for example, became and remains fundamental to Biblical study. Maimonides, without writing a specific Bible commentary, nonetheless offers significant amounts of Biblical interpretation—often quite novel—in both his Mishneh Torah and Guide. R. Yonah and Meiri wrote important Scriptural commentaries and sprinkle their other works liberally with relevant Biblical passages, interpreted to best fit the context in which they include it.

Nonetheless, none of those authors was as Biblically focused as the fifteenth century authors who have been our central focus in this study. Rashi also interpreted much of the Babylonian Talmud, Maimonides the Mishnah as a whole, R. Yonah the Talmudic tractates Berakhot, Baba Bathra, Sanhedrin, and Avodah Zarah (that we know of), Meiri almost the entire Talmud. The latter four also wrote important synthetic works, outside of commentary.

HaYizhari, Hayyun, and Abarbanel's written work concentrates more clearly on Biblical texts. Their comparatively restricted focus suggests it as a factor in how they interpreted Avot.

Accustomed to the universe of discourse natural to the study of Bible, they might have imported exegetical attitudes that were completely natural in Bible.

Their predecessors, who worked extensively in several different fields, may have been more rigid about which exegetical approaches were appropriate to which kinds of texts; these authors, primarily Biblical commentators, may have unconsciously transferred unremarkable Biblical hermeneutics to Avot.

EVIDENCE OF SEEPAGE

In the context of his intellectual biography of Hayyun, Avraham Gross portrays the Lisbon rabbi's Scriptural interpretations in ways remarkably similar to the elements we have noted in his Avot commentary. Gross notes that Hayyun lets his assumptions about the text's structural unity and economy of language rise to the midrashic level, forcing him to comment in a way that explains each element of the text.¹

Gross also notes Hayyun's attention to words in ways similar to those that we saw in Avot commentary. Hayyun interprets each word each time it appears, presumably because he recognized that words were flexible enough to carry different meanings in different contexts.² He also examined every word for the possibility of a creative interpretation, which parallels what we saw in Avot exegesis.

Most tellingly for us, in his commentary on Psalms Hayyun speaks of the **מִמֶּה הַסִּיבָה**, the *mem* at the beginning of the word that signifies a cause rather than "from"; we have already seen Abarbanel (and, later, *Midrash Shemuel*) interpret several texts with that view of the letter.³

SCRIPTURE AS THE CONTEXT OF NAHALAT AVOT

Abarbanel's Scriptural context makes itself clear in *Nahalat Avot* itself. Already in the introduction, he tips his hand, asserting that he will (innovatively, as he realizes) find a Scriptural source for every statement made in the tractate.⁴ Beyond explicitly connecting the ideas of Mishnayot to Scripture, Abarbanel several times surprisingly allows Scripture to determine the context of a Mishnah.

In chapters two and three, when he enunciates the central theme of the chapters, Abarbanel cites the verse, "refrain from evil, and do good (**סוּר מֵרָע וַעֲשֵׂה טוֹב**)," with the second chapter explaining how best to "do good", while the third analyzes the first half, avoiding evil.

Only Abarbanel's need to structure chapters as a whole and his Biblical focus explain the connection between these chapters and that verse. In fact, his claim would be more logical if the third chapter had come before the second, since he assumes that the later chapter discusses the earlier part of the verse.⁶

Another striking example of making Avot adjunct to Scripture comes when the Mishnah lists seven types of punishments that result from seven types of sin— several levels of severity of famine for various failures to tithe, pestilence for a failure to administer needed capital punishment, and so

¹ Gross, *יוסף חיון ויצירתו*, p. 51.

² *ibid.*, p. 49-50.

³ *ibid.*, p. 53.

⁴ P. 34; see Lawee's comments, p. 50. The claim itself was innovative, as Abarbanel mentions, p. 34-35; see also Lawee, p. 212, who uses this as one example of Abarbanel's legitimate claim to exegetical creativity.

⁵ Psalms 34:15. On page 93, he describes the chapter as a discussion of whether to rely purely on one's intellect, to be guided by the Torah, or to combine Torah study with intellectual analysis in choosing one's actions. He believed R. Yehudah haNasi (Judah the Prince) favored Torah-only, a view supported by Hillel (p. 102), and R. Yohanan b. Zakkai (p. 110). Other rabbis—notably R. Yehudah's son R. Gamliel (p. 98) and R. Yohanan's students (p. 112)—disagreed. In his summary (p. 131), Abarbanel assumes that R. Yehudah haNasi's position held the day, an interesting perspective for a man so deeply involved in business and politics.

⁶ Note that Abarbanel was trying to draw a parallel here between the verse and the structure of the tractate; since the verse refers to avoiding evil first, it would make most sense for the tractate to do so as well.

on.⁷ Abarbanel questions why the Mishnah chose to note these particular sins and their punishments, since other sin/punishment examples are equally well attested in Scripture and in rabbinic literature. He claims that these seven punishments correspond to those mentioned in the **תוכחה**, the section of the Bible that sternly warns the Jewish people about the disasters that will befall them if they cease to observe God's Law.⁸

Since the Mishnah does not mention the **תוכחה** and the Biblical selection does not specify the sins that lead to the wrath therein described, Abarbanel has made startling assumptions on both sides of his interpretation. He assumed, here as elsewhere, that some Scriptural text had to form the underpinning of this Mishnah, and then found one that could be made to relate. He also assumed, without evidence, that it was these sins in particular that led to the punishments described in Leviticus.⁹

SEEING RABBIS AS SEMI-DIVINE: THE CASE OF **שועות משיחו**

We have so far only spoken of Abarbanel's commentary on Avot and distinguished it from commentary on other rabbinic texts, such as aggadah. Turning to some of Abarbanel's aggadah commentary, however, will show that there, too, we see some blurring of the line of Divine revelation to sometimes include Rabbis of the Mishnah and Midrash.¹⁰ While not a complete explanation, that might easily aid his consciously or unconsciously assuming that he could treat rabbinic texts as others had only made about Scripture.

Eric Lawee provides an extended discussion of **משיחו ישועות**, Abarbanel's other major work of exegesis of rabbinic statements, part of a trilogy on eschatological matters.¹¹ His description of Abarbanel's exegesis echoes many of the assumptions, techniques, and results that we have found here. He notes, for example, that Abarbanel combined

careful (or hypercritical, depending on the reader's hermeneutic proclivities) word-by-word criticism with structural, contextual, and comparative analysis¹²...basic is the conviction, held by Abarbanel *more profoundly than by any previous aggadic interpreter*, that rabbinic sayings reflect an unsurpassedly dense, economical discursive mode.¹³

These are the techniques we already identified as midrashic, and noted in *Nahalat Avot*. Lawee, too, sees the similarities in Abarbanel's exegesis in his various works, noting that the operations of interpretation on display in Yeshu'ot meshiho are the same ones employed by Abarbanel in deciphering rabbinic maxims in Avot, Maimonidean formulations in the Guide, and the divine word.¹⁴

Lawee also recognized the theological flexibility that such a hermeneutic creates. He remarks

⁷ 5:8-9.

⁸ Leviticus 26:14-43.

⁹ P. 339.

¹⁰ Note that Almosnino, who flourished within half a century of Abarbanel, repeatedly refers to those cited in Avot as **התנא האלקי**, the Godly Rabbi of the Mishnah.

¹¹ Lawee, *Isaac Abarbanel's Stance Toward Tradition: Defense, Dissent, and Dialogue* (SUNY: Albany, 2001), p. 53, and then discusses it fully from 127-168. My own perusal of **שועות משיחו** does not find the specific techniques we have noted here, such as the reinterpretation of letters and words and the recasting of phrases. A precise analysis of that work, however, is not my concern here.

¹² Lawee, p. 134.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 139, emphasis added.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 145. The comment about the *Guide* commentary is particularly interesting, since that work was clearly written by a post-Talmudic figure who made no claim to ancient tradition or divine inspiration. It would, to my mind, show just how far this mode of exegesis had become instinctive to Abarbanel, but it requires fuller analysis.

...the assumption that the sages spoke with consummate care and compression allows Abarbanel to interpret disturbing dicta in a manner more or less congruent with his own cherished theological doctrines.¹⁵

Supporting our instinct that Abarbanel was treating rabbinic texts in a way previously reserved for Biblical—read Divinely inspired—ones, Lawee mentions Abarbanel's willingness to treat the Rabbis as quasi-prophetic figures. Lawee characterizes it this way:

...Abarbanel's defense of the sages is rhetorically vigorous: they are "perfect"; "we live by their words"; "the spirit of the Lord spoke through them"; disagreement with them is tantamount to desecration of Heaven's name. Abarbanel goes so far as to invoke a biblicism ("light and wisdom and understanding") used by him elsewhere to characterize Scripture's profoundly numinous qualities to press the point that the most adventitious rabbinic utterance radiates sublime wisdom¹⁶...the specificity of R. Eliezer's predictions is "eloquent testimony" to the repository of received truths" bequeathed to the sages by the prophets...Abarbanel is keen to stress that "these *derasbot* were not simply explanations based on the denotation of the text's words... Rather, these matters were handed down to them from the mouths of the prophets."¹⁷

Abarbanel's explicit conception of the rabbis as quasi-prophets, even if primarily rhetorical, seems crucial to his modes of reading the text. While he viewed some of those aggadot as "infallible traditions handed down...by the prophets," which would limit his rights to read the text as Midrash read Bible to only those particular statements, Lawee reminds us that he could also speak of the sages of Israel as ones "in whom the spirit of the Lord spoke" and "in numerous places...imbues...with quasi-prophetic capacities."¹⁸

One example of Abarbanel's quasi-prophetic view of the rabbis seems worth repeating here, to give a clearer picture of how far he could take this assumption. In the introduction to **ישועות משיח**, Abarbanel explains an extended passage from **פרקי דרבי אליעזר**, the eighth century Midrash that records its ideas as statements of Mishnaic scholars. In one of his questions, Abarbanel is puzzled by R. Eliezer's interpretation of Abraham's **ברית בין הבתרים**, Covenant of the Divided Animals.¹⁹

R. Eliezer assumes that each animal symbolized one of the four kingdoms that ruled over the Jewish people, Edom (Rome), Greece, Persia and Media, and Ishmael. Abarbanel decides that the list actually means to go backward in history from R. Eliezer's time, but then wonders why the fourth kingdom is referred to as Ishmael, when it should have been Babylonia.

He explains that R. Eliezer recognized that six hundred years after he lived, a man named Mohammed would arise who would convert the Babylonians to Islam, absorbing them into the Ishmaelite people. They would not only be the first non-Ishmaelite nation to accept Islam, they would eventually become so assimilated into that religion that their capital would become the seat of the caliph's reign.

Abarbanel is not clear as to whether it was R. Eliezer's prophecy or a prophetic tradition that

R. Eliezer was the only one to record,²⁰ but this is the kind of blurring of lines we have

¹⁵ *ibid*, p. 143.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 147.

¹⁷ *ibid.* p. 163.

¹⁸ *ibid*, p. 164.

¹⁹ Described in Genesis 15:9-21. I have used an edition printed by **אוצר הפוסקים**, Jerusalem, 1999. The selection mentioned in the text appears on pages 13-14.

²⁰ At the bottom of the right column on page 13, Abarbanel says that the interpretations of verses that R. Eliezer offered were doubtless traditions from the prophets. However on p. 14, he concludes his claim about

noted in Nahalat Avot. That Abarbanel could assume that R. Eliezer had predicted both the advent of Islam and the course of its conquest of the East speaks to a remarkably different sense of rabbinic writings than previously.

RABBIS AS SEMIPROPHETS: AN INCOMPLETE PICTURE OF יְשׁוּעוֹת מְשִׁיחוֹ

We cannot leave readers with a false impression of יְשׁוּעוֹת מְשִׁיחוֹ, or claim that Abarbanel consistently adopted that pose towards the Rabbis or their writings. Lawee takes pains to note a countervailing aspect of Abarbanel's work as well. Despite his claims about their tradition and insight, Abarbanel is willing to dismiss aggadic texts as a minority opinion, and even to disagree with Biblical readings that he found in Midrash.²¹ This is especially so when the text presents an eschatological view that diverges from Abarbanel's own.

In addition, Abarbanel also often casts "a spotlight on the humanity of" rabbinic figures, ascribing aspects of their work to personal human tendencies. In a prominent example, Lawee notes that Abarbanel assumed that R. Akiva, in identifying Bar Kokhba as the Messiah, "succumbed to wishful thinking."²²

Any full picture of יְשׁוּעוֹת מְשִׁיחוֹ, then, must take account of the diverse tendencies in the work. As Lawee says, "there is, in sum, something to Abarbanel's expressions of admiration for the sages in יְשׁוּעוֹת מְשִׁיחוֹ, but these tell only part of the story." The other part of the story, Abarbanel's willingness to be untraditional, to offer "highly original" interpretations, along with a "messianic vision that...is in many ways unique," and his highly innovative "twists on and syntheses of his raw materials" cannot be ignored.

Even in its most famous aspect, its "powerful apocalyptic rhetoric," Lawee notes that the passing of the date Abarbanel had identified as the time for the advent of the Messiah, 1503, "left no mark on Abarbanel's writing during his last half decade of life."²³ Despite his rhetoric, then, Abarbanel's reality is complex and multitextured.

With all appropriate caveats, the first part of the story can still help us in our search for the source of Abarbanel's willingness to read rabbinic texts midrashically. His using a hermeneutic most familiar from Biblical study in יְשׁוּעוֹת מְשִׁיחוֹ, which he there coupled with descriptions of the rabbis as semiprophetic (he does not do so explicitly in Nahalat Avot), supports the idea that he had begun to give the text a semi-Biblical standing.

As we have noted, Lawee amply proves that Abarbanel did not take these ideas to their fullest extent even in יְשׁוּעוֹת מְשִׁיחוֹ, let alone in *Nahalat Avot*, where the rhetorical element plays a much smaller role. It would be a mistake, then, to exaggerate the importance of the examples from יְשׁוּעוֹת מְשִׁיחוֹ for our question. In addition, we have no evidence that haYizhari and Hayyun shared Abarbanel's view of the Rabbis of the time of the Mishnah. As a part of the puzzle, though, it deserves to be mentioned.

The chain of reasoning we have developed so far points to these commentators' work on Biblical texts as contributing to the way they read Avot. To avoid seeing their hermeneutic as simple carelessness—not realizing that different texts require different rules of interpretation—we noted that Abarbanel reads aggadah in similar fashion as well, even characterizing the rabbis of the Mishnah as quasi-prophets. While this offers one explanation for how they came to read Avot as they did Scripture, it raises the further question as to how or why they would assume that rabbis of the Mishnah could write semi-Scripturally.

Babylon's being called Ishmael by saying that "this Godly one," a reference to R. Eliezer, had envisioned all of this in a prophetic spirit.

²¹ Pp. 164-65.

²² P. 165.

²³ Ibid, p. 167.

A ROLE FOR POLEMICS?

The increasing encroachment of the Christian-Jewish debate into the field of Talmud study might shed light on that last question. While that debate had long focused on Biblical texts, beginning in the thirteenth century Christians had come to focus on Talmudic texts as well.

By the end of the fourteenth century, the Talmudic element of polemics was well established, as most easily evidenced by the literature the era produced. R. Shem Tov ibn Shaprut's *Even Bohan*, R. Moses haKohen's *Ezer haEmunah*, Profiat Duran's *Kelimat haGoyim* were all dedicated to countering anti-Christian polemic, compiling sections of the Talmud for use in such disputations.²⁴

Further proof that polemics was a continuing concern comes from R. Simon b. Zemah Duran's *Magen Avot*. When the Mishnah enjoins people to develop the ability to answer heretics convincingly, Duran adds that in his time people interrupt their study of Torah to learn the techniques of polemics.²⁵ More suggestive yet is Duran's reading of a Mishnah that calls *מסורת* a protective boundary around the Torah. Rashi and R. Yonah had interpreted the word as referring to the tradition of how to spell the words of the Torah. For them, tradition protects the Torah by guaranteeing its text against corruption.

For Duran, the tradition of spelling protects not the Torah itself, but the inferences that the Talmud used to justify various legal decisions.²⁶ Since these inferences were often based on a particular letter, the exact text became vital to maintaining their viability. Duran's concern with safeguarding the Rabbis' textual inferences seems most appropriate to a polemical context, and also gives evidence that it was the Rabbis' words that were under Christological attack, not just the Bible's.

A comment at the beginning of haYizhari's commentary shows his concern with the issue as well. Explaining why Avot begins with a list of the generations from Moses to the end of the Mishnah, haYizhari says that it is

against people who...destroy and speak against the Talmudic compositions...but the explanations of the *mitsvot* and the fundamentals of the Torah are a tradition for the great Sages from the mouth of Moses our Master, peace be on him, from the mouth of God, He should be blessed. For this, it elaborated the line of reception from Moses to the students of R. Yohanan b. Zakkai.²⁷

²⁴ S. Krauss, *The Jewish-Christian Controversy*, revised by W. Horbury (Tubingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1995), pp. 165-8; see also pp. 212-13 for Duran's reliance on Profiat Duran. J. Cohen, *The Friars and The Jews* (Cornell U. Press: Ithaca, 1982), pp. 78ff. documents the rise of the Talmud as a focus of polemics in the thirteenth century, as well as the flowering of such tracts as the *Pugio Fidei*, a Christian collection of rabbinic material, to help polemicists learn how to debate it.

Note that R. Chazan, "The Condemnation of the Talmud Reconsidered (1239-1248)" *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 55 (1988), pp. 11-30, disputes Cohen's reconstruction of the first attack on the Talmud. Rather than being an attack on the Talmud itself as heretical, he sees the attack as focusing on specific Talmudic teachings. Either way, Chazan does not dispute the newness of using the Talmud extensively in religious debate. For an example of his repeated reference to Friar Paul's use of Talmud as new, see his "From Friar Paul to Friar Raymond: The Development of Innovative Missionizing Argumentation" *Harvard Theological Review* 76:3 (1983), pp. 289-306.

²⁵ 2:14, 36a. In his days, he says, people study the heretics' books so as to take the battle, as it were, to them. The history of rabbis' struggles with heretics that he provides (starting from the Greeks) suggests this was a burning issue. Maimonides had permitted responding only to non-Jewish heretics, but Duran left it up to each person's judgement, adding an elaboration of the reward open to one who returns nonbelievers to faith. See also 5:23, 94a, where Duran notes that people allow themselves to interrupt their learning in order to know how to respond to attacks on the religion, despite the simple reading of a Talmudic statement in *Menahot* that allows extraneous learning only at very limited times.

²⁶ 3:13, 49b.

²⁷ Houghton 61, 1a; translation is mine.

HaYizhari's role at the Disputation at Tortosa of 1412-13²⁸ complements this text in showing that polemics was a practical issue in his communal life. What might have been taken as a merely rhetorical reference to heretics becomes-- knowing haYizhari's biography, whether the Disputation happened before or after he wrote the commentary on Avot²⁹-- a reflection of a struggle he was himself forced to undertake.

The need to repeatedly prove that the Rabbis' words did and do not serve Christological purposes might cause their defenders to stress their greatness as Jews. While Nahmanides famously limited his commitment to accept all of the Rabbis' statements in disputing Pablo Christiani,³⁰ others could easily choose the opposite strategy, to increase the reverence they evinced towards these figures in combating the Christian claims. Their underlying concern with maintaining faith in the Rabbis' words--their own and others'--might have contributed to haYizhari, Hayyun, and Abarbanel treating their words Biblically, reading them as if the same hermeneutical conventions could apply.

THE RELEVANCE OF R. ISAAC KANPANTON

We have so far glossed over the lack of any demonstrable connection between the first two members of our trio, haYizhari and Hayyun. Abarbanel's links to both are well-established-- he cites haYizhari often, is known to have corresponded with Hayyun and may have been his student.³¹


Hayyun's having been a student of R. Isaac Kanpanton (d. 1463) suggests a perhaps complementary source of this textual method.³² Kanpanton's hermeneutic, which he laid out in a short work entitled *דרכי הגמרא*, *The Ways of the Talmud*, would have shaped his student's to some extent.³³

D. Boyarin has provided the fullest analysis of Kanpanton's method, characterizing it as involving close attention to the structure of Talmudic discussions³⁴ and to their specific word

²⁸ For a lengthy discussion of the Disputation, although with minimal attention to haYizhari, see Y. Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, vol. 2 (JPS: Philadelphia, 1966), pp. 170-243.

²⁹ To my mind, this text argues in favor of his having written the commentary after the Disputation, but note Ravitzky's comment cited in the Introduction, note 7. If he wrote the commentary before, his concern with such matters might be one reason that he was selected to represent the Jewish side at the Disputation.

³⁰ As during the Disputation of 1263, when he rejected the need to accept every aggadah as binding, either legally or philosophically. Eric Lawee, however, points out that Nahmanides never relies solely on this view in his defenses, see Lawee, *Isaac Abarbanel's Stance Toward Tradition*, p. 250, note 16, and the literature cited there. On Nahmanides' comments, see now M. Saperstein and N. E. Berg, "Arab Chains' and the 'Good Things of Sepharad': Aspects of Jewish Exile" *AJSReview* 26:2 (2002), pp. 308-311.

³¹ On that connection, see A. Gross, "R. Yosef Hayyun and R. Yitshaq Abravanel--Intellectual Relationship" (Hebrew) *Michael* 11 (1989), 23-33 and מנהיג קהילת ליסבון ויצירתו (Rabbi Joseph b. Abraham Hayyun: The Leader of the Community of Lisbon and His Works,  (Bar-Ilan: Ramat Gan, 1993).

³² Little is known of Kanpanton's biography. For the few known details, see A. David, "Towards a Biography of R. Isaac Kanpanton, One of the Giants of Spain in the 15th Century (Hebrew)," *Kiryat Sefer* 51 (1977), pp. 324-26. David notes the tradition that Kanpanton lived an extremely long life, with one source mentioning the figure of 103 years. Whether or not that exact figure is accurate, the reports of his having lived to an advanced old age justify accepting the possibility that he was a younger contemporary of haYizhari, who was already a venerable communal leader in 1413. The date of 1493 in D. Boyarin, "Moslem, Christian, and Jewish Cultural Interaction in Sefardic Talmudic Interpretation" *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 5:1 (2002), p. 1, is a typographical error.

³³ Gross, p. 72-73. Gross notes that Kanpanton refers to explaining Scripture this way as well, see Kanpanton's *דרכי הגמרא*, *The Ways of the Talmud* (Zikhron Yaakov, 1992), pp. 7 and 22-3. The bulk of the brief work, however, discusses the proper way to study Talmudic texts and their commentators.

³⁴ *דרכי הגמרא*, p. 22, section 1 in chapter 5.

choice.³⁵ Kanpanton assumed, as we mentioned for Hayyun, that Talmudic texts (and, even more surprisingly, Talmudic *commentators* such as Rashi and Nahmanides) expressed themselves with perfect economy and felicity; each word, therefore, must have been chosen to convey a meaning specifically geared to the issue at hand.³⁶ While that did not lead to the kind of wordplay that we have seen in Avot commentary, it does betray a similar set of exegetical assumptions.

Kanpanton also explicitly ratified the notion of a **סברה מבחון**, which urges a reader to ask whether he could have independently deduced an idea enunciated in the Talmud. If so, the reader needs to question why the rabbi made an obvious statement; if not, the reader must then wonder what forced the rabbi to that conclusion.³⁷

Those underlying principles of reading remind us of the ones that fueled the Avot commentaries we have seen. Even just applying the two main assumptions--that words are chosen to convey an extremely exact meaning (and not necessarily that word's general sense), and that texts are structured so that they flow smoothly from beginning to end-- allows for most of the exegetical innovations we saw in Hayyun and Abarbanel.³⁸

Applied to Avot, those assumptions could easily convert it, like Scripture, into a **ספר אחיד**, a unified text, in which at least each rabbi's group of statements would be expected to revolve around a central topic or concern. Each word, as well, would become invested with significance if it were not the simplest word available to the Mishnah. Discovering that significance was bound to yield innovative commentary, which may have been part of the goal, as we will discuss below.

KANPANTON AS A FACTOR IN AVOT EXEGESIS: THE EXAMPLE OF MAHARAL

Kanpanton's broad influence on Jewish learning generally would itself justify the hypothesis that his method had some impact on Avot study. A. Grossman, for example, notes that

in the wake of the Expulsion, his [Kanpanton's] students left to centers of Jewish populations... and became the teachers of the heads of the academies and scholars of Torah in Jerusalem, Safed, Constantinople, Salonika, Cairo, and Fez.³⁹

One example makes the connection between Talmud and Avot even clearer. H.Z. Dimitrovsky claimed that Kanpanton decisively influenced the development of methods of Talmud study among Polish Jews as well.⁴⁰ One famous leader of Polish and Czech Jewry who Dimitrovsky

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 12, section 1 in chapter 2. See also page 7, the general introduction, which summarizes Kanpanton's central ideas. For a full discussion, see Boyarin, **הספרדי העיון**, *Spanish Talmudic Study* (Jerusalem, 1989), p. 8-27. H. Z. Dimitrovsky, **בית מדרשו של ר' יעקב בירב בצפת**, (*The Academy of R. Jacob Berab in Safed*), *Sefunot* 7 (1963), pp. 43-102 and **על דרך הפלפול**, (*The Method of Pilpul*) Salo Baron Jubilee Volume (Proceedings of the American Academy of Jewish Research), (1975), vol. III, p. 113-82, also outlines Kanpanton's method, as does H. Bentuv, **שיטת לימוד התלמוד בישיבות שלוניקי ותורקי-ה'**, (*The Method of the Study of Talmud in the Academies of Salonika and Turkey*) *Sefunot* 13, pp. 5-103.

³⁶ For examples of this assumption applied to Talmud, see **דרכי הגמרא**, *The Ways of the Talmud*, p. 10, section 6 (where Kanpanton urges readers to derive *all* the intended information from the Talmud's statements), and pp. 13-14, section 6. For Rashi, see p. 27, section 6, and for Nahmanides, section 7.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 15, section 2. Note that Kanpanton does not give any actual examples of how he would use the technique at that point.

³⁸ See also p. 19, section 3, which raises the topic of considering middle options, and not just the extremes, which were important elements of Almosnino's and Levi's works, as seen in the previous chapter.

³⁹ A. Grossman, **יצירתו ההלכתית של חכמי ספרד**, "The Halakhic Creations of the Sages of Spain" in **מורשת ספרד**, *The Legacy of Sefarad* ed. H. Beinart (Magnes Press: Jerusalem, 1992), p. 167. The centers he names were all those where we find commentaries that follow Kanpanton's method.

⁴⁰ H.Z. Dimitrovsky, **על דרך הפלפול**, (*The Method of Pilpul*) p. 113-82. Boyarin offhandedly supports that view in "Moslem, Christian, and Jewish Cultural Interaction", p. 9, note 17.

saw as influenced by Kanpanton was Maharal, R. Judah Loew of Prague (c. 1512-1609); fortunately for us, Maharal included a commentary on Avot among his many books.

This commentary, which Maharal titled *דרך חיים*, *Path of Life*, was written around the same time as *Midrash Shemuel* but at a great geographic distance. Maharal uses many of the exegetical techniques we have studied here; coupled with Dimitrovsky's view that Kanpanton's method of Talmud study had a formative influence on Maharal, he provides more evidence of the relationship between that kind of Talmudic hermeneutics and Avot study.

Reviewing his comments on one Mishnah will amply demonstrate those similarities of exegesis. The third Mishnah in the tractate, which we have already seen in part several times, reads in full:

Antignos, man of Sokho, said: Do not be like servants who serve the master on the condition of receiving a reward, but rather serve the Master without the condition of receiving a reward, and let the fear of Heaven be upon you.

Maharal questions several aspects of this Mishnah. First, he wonders⁴¹ why Antignos is bothered by people worshipping God with reward in mind, since the Talmud permits donating money to charity while announcing a hoped-for reward (a son's healing or gaining a share in the World to Come).⁴²

Second, he questions why Antignos had to articulate both halves of his statement. Once he had said that one should not worship God for the sake of the reward, Maharal says, do we not already know that service of God should be without thought of reward?

Third, Maharal puzzles over the phrase fear of Heaven—why did the Mishnah not refer to fear of God or some other metaphor for Him (such as *המקום*, the Omnipresent One)?

Maharal's solutions rely on the types of textual assumptions we have seen in the preceding chapters. He first notes that Antignos' addressing general issues of worship of God, which applies to all humanity, teaches readers of his lofty spiritual level. Shimon b. Shetah, Antignos' predecessor, had spoken about the world as a whole; Antignos was only slightly less broad, thinking of all humanity. He also notes how later Mishnayot fit with this trend. That concern with the flow of Mishnayot, not just the connection of each Mishnah to its predecessor, typified the later era of Avot exegesis.

To answer his questions, Maharal highlights two terms in the Talmudic statement about giving charity. The person who gave charity with a result in mind is called a *גמור צדיק*, a perfectly righteous person, and the word that person uses in his description of his charity is *למען*, so that. Maharal reads *למען* as stating a desired effect rather than expectation of actual causality.

Focusing on those terms, Maharal differentiates *גמור צדיק* from an *עובד מאהבה*, one who worships God out of love. While there is nothing wrong with being "perfectly righteous," it is not the highest religious level. The *גמור צדיק* takes note of the reward he hopes his actions will bring about (the meaning of *למען* according to Maharal), but those who worship out of love, the standard Antignos is recommending, do not pay attention to those outcomes at all.

Maharal finds support for his claim that Antignos was espousing a higher-than-required standard of conduct in the Mishnaic rabbi's choosing to clearly state both the attitude to avoid and the attitude to adopt. Had Antignos only stated the negative, readers might have assumed that he meant to actually prohibit such thoughts. By including the positive, he made clear that he was expressing a desired standard rather than a fundamental requirement.⁴³

⁴¹ As had Abarbanel, see our discussion in the first chapter, text just after note 25.

⁴² Among other places, the statement appears in *Baba Bathra*, 10a.

⁴³ Maharal's reading contrasts with Duran's, who thought Avot generally speaks of *מדות חסידות*, supererogatory behavior. That assumption had led Duran to interpret a Mishnah that states both sides of an equation as signaling an absolute requirement, see his discussion of 2:13 and 14.

Yet Antignos recognized that אהבה alone can breed the contempt of excessive familiarity. To counteract that danger, Maharal claims, he added the need for fear of God as part of his discussion of worship based on love.

Maimonides had previously offered that explanation, but Maharal also uses the idea to explain the choice of the word שמים, Heaven. By referring to God as Heaven, Antignos successfully emphasized the distance between human beings and God. It is not only the notion of fear that transmits the message, in Maharal's reading, but the stress on God's otherness as well. Maharal closes the comment by noting that the pairs of Sages who followed Antignos split up Antignos' two-sided statement, with one stressing אהבה, love, and the other יראה, fear.

On this one Mishnah, Maharal has made two structural comments and two inferences from choice of words that echo the exegetical moves we have noted in haYizhari, Hayyun, Abarbanel, Uceda, and the other sixteenth century commentators. Structurally, he defined a connection between Shimon b. Shetah, Antignos, and the pairs of leaders who follow. This makes most of the chapter a continuous chain of discussion (as we saw in Abarbanel), although Maharal does not stress the cohesion he has created. He also focused on the structure of Antignos' double-sided statement to further support his view that Antignos was laying out a higher standard, not a minimal religious requirement.

Moving to interpretation, Maharal distinguished the Talmudic statement (giving charity *so that a child should live*) from the Mishnah by focusing on the Talmud's reference to a "perfectly righteous" person as opposed to the worshipper of love that Maharal assumed was the focus of Antignos' statement. The difference between the terms על מנת and למען and the implications of a reference to שמים, each of which Maharal explains in his own way, fuel his other interpretations.

We have no evidence as to where Maharal learned to read texts this way, but Kanpanton is a prime candidate.⁴⁴ Dimitrovsky claimed that Ashkenazic schools of *pilpul* after the sixteenth century were influenced by the Talmudic methodology of Kanpanton and his students.⁴⁵ In particular, he asserts that all three of *pilpul's* prime opponents—R. Ephraim Luntshits, R. Isaiah Horowitz, and Maharal—were originally trained in exactly this method of study.⁴⁶

Given Dimitrovsky's characterization of Kanpanton's influence on Maharal and the similarities between Kanpanton's hermeneutic and those in the Avot commentators we are analyzing, we suggest that Maharal's Avot commentary simply applied his ordinary Talmudic exegesis to Avot. We thus have an example of Kanpanton's method producing commentary on Avot similar to haYizhari, Hayyun, and Abarbanel, supporting the view that the developments were related.

KANPANTON'S ROOTS

That Kanpanton or his method may have played some role in the development of Avot exegesis obligates us to consider the roots of Kanpanton's method itself. I. Ta-Shema has claimed that it descends from late-thirteenth century versions of Tosafot, possibly brought to Spain by a Tosafist named R. Peretz haKohen.⁴⁷ In contrast, M. Breuer⁴⁸ and Dimitrovsky see important elements of *pilpul* as originating with Kanpanton and moving from there to Eastern Europe. Among those who

⁴⁴ Bernard Septimus pointed out to me that Maharal cites Abarbanel at least once in דרך חיים 6:3, p. 287. Nonetheless, the commentary as a whole bears too little similarity to *Nahalat Avot* to see Abarbanel as a shaping factor in developing Maharal's hermeneutic.

⁴⁵ H. Z. Dimitrovsky, "על דרך הפלפול," p. 162. He also notes there that Maharal was particularly interested in books from Spain and Spanish exiles.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p. 164.

⁴⁷ I. Ta-Shema, הספרנות הפרשנית לתלמוד, *The Exegetical Literature of the Talmud* vol. II (Magnes Press: Jerusalem, 1999), pp. 130-142.

⁴⁸ M. Breuer, "עלית הפלפול והחילוקים בישיבות אשכנז," *The Rise of Pilpul and Hilukim in Ashkenazic Academies* Rabbi Jehiel Jacob Weinberg Memorial Volume, eds. A. Hildesheimer and K. Kahana, (Jerusalem, 1970), pp. 241-255.

look outside of Jewish contexts, Gross assumes that Kanpanton was adapting the textual methods of the Scholastics to study of Talmud.⁴⁹

Without specifically disputing those claims, Boyarin instead focused on Kanpanton's concern with linguistics and semantics, seeing it as evidence of the influence of Aristotelian theory of language. In his first work on Kanpanton, he briefly ascribed it to an Arabic translation of Aristotle's *De Interpretatione*.⁵⁰ Recently, he has treated this issue more fully, showing parallels between Kanpanton's methods and terminology and the discussions of meaning found in Greek, Arabic, and Jewish writers.⁵¹

Since these explanations were offered in the context of Talmudic exegesis, none of them noted that haYizhari—who, we need to remember, was significantly older than Kanpanton—made similar assumptions about meaning in his reading of Avot. While Kanpanton may have been a proximate influence on Hayyun, and through him, perhaps, on Abarbanel, he cannot have filled that role for haYizhari.⁵² HaYizhari and Kanpanton worked in parallel, or with Kanpanton writing slightly later; haYizhari's development, then, needs to be addressed in formulating an explanation of how this hermeneutic came about.⁵³

THE SEARCH FOR NOVELTY AND HOW IT SHAPES READING

Boyarin and others who have discussed the issue ignored an important element of Kanpanton's work, his stress on חידוש (novel insights). Kanpanton was not only concerned with economy of language and density of meaning, appropriately emphasized by Boyarin, but also that each piece of a text, each element of language, reveal a *novelty*, an idea readers would otherwise not have known.

That this contention was itself new should be obvious by its not having appeared among previous commentators, of either Talmud or Avot.⁵⁴ Too, in a system that originally consisted of written maxims explained by an oral tradition, there is no obvious reason to expect that all their recorded discussions should be either so economically expressed or so full of novel ideas as Kanpanton asserted.

Breuer also recognized the importance of the search for חידוש in this method. He suggested that scholars, including those involved in Torah study, constantly seek innovation, a place to make their own mark. Periodically, one way of study reaches a saturation point and another has to be enunciated. This, in his view, is what happened with Kanpanton.⁵⁵

From a general intellectual-historical point of view, Breuer's claims make sense, particularly in the realm of commentary, where writers need some justification for adding their book to the shelves of Jewish literature.⁵⁶

In this case, however, it does not go far enough. Kanpanton and haYizhari not only found new ways to read texts, they self-consciously and deliberately focused on insight as essential to

⁴⁹ P. 73.

⁵⁰ Boyarin, העיון הספרדי, *Spanish Talmudic Study*, p. 53-4.

⁵¹ Boyarin, "Moslem, Christian, and Jewish Cultural Interaction," pp. 1-12.

⁵² It is possible that haYizhari and Kanpanton both reflect intellectual currents available in the culture at large, a view that Boyarin suggests, *ibid.*, pp. 17-18. We will discuss that further in the next chapter, after completing our review of possible influences on this development.

⁵³ Of course, he, too, would have been influenced by contemporary views of language, but his focus on novelty seems at least as relevant. Novelty would be the reason that these authors turned to a deeper examination of language.

⁵⁴ With the exception of the Tosafists noted by Ta-Shema, as mentioned above.

⁵⁵ Breuer, pp. 251-252.

⁵⁶ We have mentioned this possibility in connection with Yavets, see Chapter 2.

interpretation. חידוש, novelty, was a linchpin of the method, not just a common appetite of the scholar.

We have already mentioned Abarbanel's repeated claims to novelty; haYizhari and Hayyun mention חידוש in their commentaries in ways that show its importance to them as well. Hayyun once questions a Mishnah precisely because it seems not to have any new information, and another time sees the Mishnah itself as questioning a Scriptural text for lacking such newness.⁵⁷

HaYizhari's focus on חידוש is shown in two comments, the more surprising of which we will leave for later. Worth noting here, however, is his reading of a statement in the fourth chapter of Avot that speaks of "repentance and good deeds" as protecting a person from punishment. Bothered by the need for both—repentance should be good enough-- some commentators suggested that the repentance had to be *followed* by good deeds to prove the sincerity and lasting impact of the repentance.

HaYizhari instead claims that even one who performs good deeds needs to be מחדש, to continually renew that repentance.⁵⁸ While that example does not speak of חידוש in the intellectual/exegetical sense, it does assume the importance of newness within a religious experience that would seem to only be a one-time event. HaYizhari also speaks of חידוש in Torah study, as we will see later in this chapter.

חידוש IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

Even if the sources we have already studied do not prove that finding original interpretations was an end of its own for our fifteenth century authors, the stress on innovation we find among sixteenth century exegetes will.

Earlier, we raised the possibility that authors search for novelty to create an intellectual space for their own contribution; Breuer thought the whole method of *pilpul* arose to facilitate such contributions. By the sixteenth century, though, the new hermeneutics had laid any issue of textual saturation to rest, with authors finding novel interpretations with ease. Their continued focus on חידוש at that time reflects back on the fifteenth century and this mode of exegesis as a whole, showing that חידוש was essential to its program.

A few examples from Uceda's *Midrash Shemuel* not only demonstrate a continued interest in חידוש, novel interpretation, for its own sake, but show that it had become part of the social structure of those who studied Torah. Perhaps the best example comes when Uceda encounters the description of R. Eliezer b. Hurqenos, a student of R. Yohanan ben Zakkai. In R. Yohanan's characterization, R. Eliezer's powers of retention were his chief skill, expressed through the metaphor of a well-lined pit that does not lose a drop. Other Talmudic sources also recognize that R. Eli'ezer's talents lay particularly in preserving the traditions of the past.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ 1:5, p. 88, Hayyun questions Yose b. Yohanan's comments as too simple to be included in Avot, seeking some חידוש in those words. On 5:1, p. 227, the Mishnah questions why the Torah uses ten verbs to describe God's Creation of the World. The Mishnah's phrase, מה תלמוד לומר, means "what does it teach us?" Hayyun adds the word חידוש, so the question reads, "what lesson and novelty does it tell us?"

⁵⁸ Turning חידוש into the verb of מחדש raises echoes of the liturgical phrase יום תמיד, Who renews in His goodness each day, as we will discuss below.

⁵⁹ See *Sukkah* 28a, where he claims never to have said anything he did not hear from his teachers. For discussions of R. Eli'ezer, see Y. Gilat, 'ר' אליעזר בן הורקנוס ומקומה בתולדות ההלכה משנתו של ר', *R. Eliezer son of Hurqenos' Ideology and Its Place in the History of Halakhah* (Bar-Ilan: Ramat Gan, 1984) and A. Sagi, "אלו ואלו:", *של השיח ההלכתי: עיון בספרות ישראל משמעותו*, *These and These: The Meaning of the Halakhic Conversation, A Study in the Literature of Israel* (Tel Aviv, 1996).

Other texts in Rabbinic literature—such as the beginning of פרקי דרבי אליעזר-- ascribe more creativity to R. Eliezer, so Uceda could ostensibly have been trying to reconcile the two traditions. However, he does not

Uceda nevertheless finds in that metaphor a reference to his creative powers. He points out a redundancy in the phrase “well-lined pit that does not lose a drop,” since being well lined already implies that it does not lose a drop. That redundancy, according to Uceda, informs readers that the comparison to the pit was meant only in terms of its retentive powers.⁶⁰

Such a pit’s waters, however, also tend to be stale, not as sweet as running water. Maintaining the metaphor, Uceda notes that a tradition simply passed on without adding any new material becomes stale, similar to standing waters. R. Eliezer, in addition to retaining all the Torah he heard, also managed to innovate, to provide sweetness to the Torah he produced.

Uceda’s interpretation reverses the simple thrust of the text. Since the end of that Mishnah contrasts R. Eliezer to R. Elazar b. Arakh,⁶¹ whose skills were explicitly creative, it seems to be dividing the two areas of intellectual expertise. The Talmud also distinguishes retention as separate from creativity and recognizes that those skilled at one were often not skilled at the other.⁶² Uceda’s forcing חידוש into this text demonstrates its importance to him.

Uceda’s other references to חידוש verify its centrality to his view of the endeavor of Torah study. He warns against embarrassing a visiting scholar whose insights are not in fact novel, meaning that in his world it was considered embarrassing to speak in public without offering a חידוש.⁶³ When the Mishnah refers to “warming oneself” at the fire of the Sages, Uceda reads that as finding חידושים, novel ideas.⁶⁴ He also assumes that if a person forgets his own חידושים, he is included among those who are blamed for forgetting words of Torah; creative ideas, in other words, immediately became a part of the Torah that one was required not to forget.⁶⁵

J. Hacker has noted the stress on innovation among the Jews in the Ottoman Empire during this period, meaning that Uceda was not alone.⁶⁶ Hacker indicates that audience pressure contributed

mention those sources, giving at least the impression that it was Uceda’s interest in creativity that fueled his comment.

⁶⁰ 2:10, 117. Note that several hundred years of medieval commentators had not been bothered by what Uceda saw as a redundancy.

⁶¹ As we have seen, the Mishnah records two traditions as to whether R. Yohanan b. Zakkai believed R. Eliezer or R. Elazar would have outweighed all the other sages of the Jewish people. R. Yonah does not see the two versions as arguing with each other, but assumes that R. Eliezer was meant to be the paradigm of memory and knowledge, not creativity.

⁶² See *Horiyot* 14a, where the Talmud contrasts the two.

⁶³ 1:4, 22.

⁶⁴ 2:12, 134.

⁶⁵ 3:10, 192. See also 3:23, 237, where he interprets אין בינה, אין דעת אם, if there if there is no insight, there is no knowledge, as making the ability to distinguish right from wrong dependent on the ability to achieve innovative insight. Last, see 5:6, 375, where he understands the requirement to admit not having heard something as conceding that a friend’s חידוש is, indeed, novel; his assumption that a person might *not* freely admit that someone else had a creative idea suggests a remarkably competitive atmosphere.

⁶⁶ J. Hacker, “The Intellectual Activity of the Jews of the Ottoman Empire During the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries” in *Jewish Thought in the Seventeenth Century*, eds. I. Twersky and B. Septimus (Harvard U. Press: Cambridge, 1987), 98-100. Hacker describes the trend to originality as “overly-stressed,” and attributes the flight from *peshat*, plainsense readings of texts, to the *need to innovate*, which supports our claim in the text. Hacker cites sources that describe speakers’ fear that someone would interrupt them to show that their חידוש actually already appeared elsewhere.

Although Hacker candidly admits that he has not studied the Jews living in the Land of Israel, *Midrash Shemuel*’s concern with חידוש, his offering multiple explanations of the same text, and his anthology--perhaps to prevent someone from claiming that an earlier commentary already made his point-- all echo Hacker’s portrayal. See also Hacker’s Hebrew articles, “The Intellectual Activity of the Jews of the Ottoman Empire During the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries” *Tarbiz* 53 (1984), 569-603, and “The Spanish Derashah in the 16th Century: Between Literature and a Historical Source” *Pe’amim* 26 (1986), 108-27.

to the tendency, mentioning that audiences would interrupt speakers who were simply repeating previously known ideas. Uceda's comments suggest that he concurred in the belief in the objective value of חידוש .

To some extent, we could (and perhaps should) stop there. We have shown that the hermeneutic shift that Boyarin previously identified in Talmud study occurred in Avot study as well, and offered some reasons for the change. Some of those reasons were unique to Avot, such as the commentators involved having been primarily Biblical scholars, and may have applied the techniques of one type of literature to the other. Others were common to Talmud and Avot, such as the polemical atmosphere surrounding Talmud in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

The similarity to Kanpanton's work also suggested reasons for the change, including Boyarin's connecting it to a general concern with linguistics among fifteenth century Spanish thinkers. All of that, however, neglects to explain the stress on חידוש, the concern that each element of the text convey some novel idea, found in both haYizhari and Kanpanton.

We cannot explain it, either, but one tantalizing text in haYizhari seems too interesting to ignore. We offer it not as an actual claim, but as a seed to be followed up further should more evidence arise.

Having approvingly repeated Maimonides' claim that matters of tradition never became the subjects of dispute in ancient times, haYizhari says that such disputes only developed on matters that had not been explicitly addressed before, meaning new topics for which scholars had to use traditional principles of inference to deduce how to handle them. Such issues were, haYizhari says, "details of laws that arise new all the time without being explicitly recorded in writing."

That part of the comment is not yet revolutionary, as it simply notes the need to constantly apply the principles of textual inference to rule on matters that have never arisen before. HaYizhari goes on to say, however,

they [the Rabbis] of Blessed Memory, said in Genesis Rabbah: "There is no day that the Holy One Blessed Be He does not innovate law, as the verse says..." the meaning of this statement is to say that the innovations of laws were not recorded, like the happenings of time, and that is why those who ordered the blessings [of the Shema] said "Who renews Creation in His goodness, every day." Nonetheless, they are embedded in the Order of Creation, and that is why it says "there is nothing new under the sun." So, too, the matter is equally so with the laws that arise anew all the time without being recorded in writing, but they are embedded in the secrets of the Torah... the principles of inference that God gave us.⁶⁷

Although the text is somewhat obscure, it asserts a similarity between two realms in which novelty is found daily, Creation and Jewish law. In both cases, the innovations that arise are not completely novel, but had also never existed previously. Rather, they were implicit in their respective contexts, and came to light based on the principles of induction embedded in each.

In drawing a parallel between finding new ideas in Jewish law (and, by extension, any Jewish textual study) and God's renewal of the world at large—a move that was completely unnecessary for his central point, that rabbis have to contend with new matters on a regular basis-- haYizhari has implicitly offered a reason for the value of חידוש prevalent in his time and after.

Instead of satisfying an intellectual urge, חידוש provides a way to mimic God's bringing to light hitherto unrecognized possibilities. As God innovates in Creation daily, one of His essential attributes, scholars innovate in their textual study. *Imitatio Dei*, imitating God's interactions with the world, is among the highest of religious ideals for Jews.

⁶⁷ Houghton 61, 1b. The translation is mine.

That HaYizhari's proof-text echoes R. Hasdai Crescas, a teacher of both haYizhari and Kanpanton,⁶⁸ and the leader of Spanish Jewry in the aftermath of the riots of 1391,⁶⁹ is worth noting and setting aside for further study. Crescas, writing in a purely philosophical context, had asserted that God's creation of the world never ended. As summarized by one of his leading modern students, Crescas saw God as "continually creating worlds," as seeing Creation not as "one unique instant in eternity," but as the "eternal or perpetual or ontological creation of the universe."⁷⁰

When making that claim, Crescas too cited the text from the Blessings of the Shema that haYizhari used, "בטובו בכל יום תמיד מעשה בראשית המחדש," Who renews [or, for Crescas, recreates] in His goodness, every day, constantly, the Creation."⁷¹

HaYizhari's citing a piece of liturgy that focused on the constant novelty to be found within Creation emphasizes his concern with novelty as an end, not a means, of the new hermeneutic we have been studying here. Realizing that that same liturgical reference figured centrally in R. Hasdai Crescas' view of the eternal creation of the world suggests the possibility of a link between the two. Especially given that haYizhari and Kanpanton, two otherwise unconnected scholars who nonetheless evinced similar exegetical attitudes, were students of Crescas, it seems likely that it was in the early fifteenth century that this development took place and that Crescas' thought or teachings might have affected it.

Readers may find that one text too slim to sustain an entire theory, but it serves as one more factor in reconstructing the genesis of this mode of exegesis.

RENAISSANCE ELEMENTS

No discussion of a trend in fifteenth century intellectual history would be complete without analyzing its relationship to the Renaissance. For Abarbanel, Eric Lawee has recently discussed the issue extensively;⁷² most interestingly, for our purposes, he notes that "Abarbanel was touched by the Renaissance not only as a theologian but as an exegete, and this before 1492 and his direct encounter

⁶⁸ Rappel, in his introduction to haYizhari's commentary on Psalms 119, p. 10, only says that haYizhari knew the older scholar. Shmidman, R. *Joseph ibn Shoshan and Medieval Commentaries on Abot*, assumes (without offering evidence) that he was Crescas' student, as does Ravitzky, "In that Path that a Man Wishes to Go, They [Heaven] Lead Him?" The Paradoxical Conception of Free Will in Mattathias ha-Yizhary."

⁶⁹ And, I think most relevantly, in the aftermath of the upheavals of 1391, when he was charged with trying to renew the Jewish communities of Aragon and Catalonia.

⁷⁰ W. Harvey, *Physics and Metaphysics in Hasdai Crescas* (J.C. Gieben: Amsterdam, 1998), pp. 13-19.

⁷¹ אור ה', *Light of the Lord*, III:1:1:5. N. Ophir, R. *Hasdai Crescas as Philosophic Exegete of Rabbinic Sources in Light of the Changes in his Writings* (Hebrew, PhD Diss.: Hebrew U., 1993), pp. 127-140, discusses R. Hasdai's position on eternal creation and its evolution. Noting that Crescas rejected this position in his ביטול עקרי הנוצרים, *Nullification of Christian Principles*, Ophir accepts the claims of R. Joseph ibn Shem Tov and Abarbanel that Crescas changed his mind on this issue. D. J. Lasker, "Chasdai Crescas" in *History of Jewish Philosophy* eds. D. H. Frank and O. Leaman (Routledge: London and New York), pp. 401-02 notes debate on that matter, including S. Rosenberg's belief that Crescas' polemical work was written first. Lasker seems inclined to accept אור ה' as reflecting Crescas' true beliefs.

For our purposes, if Crescas adopted the view of eternal renewal of creation after the outbreaks of 1391, or even just enunciated it more forcefully, or at that point included the passage from the liturgy, we could at least speculate that his political need to renew the Jewish community had its echoes in a theological assertion that God is always renewing the world. Of course, this is speculation upon speculation, but entertaining nonetheless.

Interestingly, if haYizhari did mean to obliquely refer to his teacher's view of Creation, his use here indicates that Crescas' students understood their teacher not only to mean that God recreates the *same* world and creates new worlds, but that even within the existing world, He is constantly innovating and creating anew.

⁷² Lawee, Isaac Abarbanel's Stance Toward Tradition, particularly Chapter 7.

with the Italian Renaissance.”⁷³ It behooves us here to consider whether there might not be a Renaissance element in the kind of exegesis we have been tracking.

Renaissance humanism was a multifaceted phenomenon that can be discussed from numerous vantage points. Lawee, for example, raises Abarbanel’s similarity to the Renaissance by noting his willingness to

trace the textual history of biblical texts, posit the unreliability of prebiblical scriptural sources, call attention to linguistic and stylistic flaws in the speeches and writings of eminent prophets, find witting bias built into a biblical book, and claim that an author inspired by the Holy Spirit erred in his understanding of an earlier biblical text.⁷⁴

In the continuation of that discussion, Lawee also notes Abarbanel’s interest in chronology,⁷⁵ and his use of “nontraditional sources in his study of traditional ones.”⁷⁶

As in the rest of our study,⁷⁷ the attitude towards the language of earlier texts is the most productive area for us to consider in relating haYizhari, Hayyun, Abarbanel, and Kanpanton to Renaissance developments. Paula Findler and Kenneth Gouwans, discussing the remarkable persistence of the Renaissance as a productive area of historical endeavor, recently noted that “the hermeneutic of reading and methods of textual criticism have proved especially fruitful areas of inquiry.”⁷⁸ Considering our focus here, we might already sense room for similarity.

In Gouwans’ discussion of the humanists’ intellectual endeavors, he notes that the humanists’ “encounter with antiquity” included “an effort to recreate modes of thought” that had existed in earlier times.⁷⁹ That picture, Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine have pointed out,⁸⁰ may have been more the ideal than the real. Nonetheless, in reading their description of the realities of a humanist education, we find remarkable similarities to the concerns and interests so apparent in the Avot exegesis we have been studying.

Grafton and Jardine spend a chapter discussing the educational practice of Guarino (1360-1427), a Renaissance humanist. They note that Guarino split his teaching into an elementary course and a two-part advanced, or methodological, course. The first relied on texts like *Ianua*, which lists and analyzes the Latin particles of speech. In the second course, one part focused on the rules of grammar and syntax, issues we have confronted repeatedly.

Furthering the similarity to the kinds of reading that we have seen here, Grafton and Jardine describe Guarino as working his way through the text

“slowly and meticulously, trying to discuss every phrase, almost every word, that presented a problem of interpretation or revealed a novel shade of meaning.”⁸¹

⁷³ P. 202.

⁷⁴ P. 188.

⁷⁵ P. 190.

⁷⁶ P. 198.

⁷⁷ Here, of course, we echo Boyarin’s view of the development of Kanpanton’s hermeneutic.

⁷⁸ P. Findler and K. Gouwans “Introduction: The Persistence of the Renaissance” *AHR* 103:1 (Feb. 1998), p. 53.

⁷⁹ K. Gouwans, “Perceiving the Past: Renaissance Humanism After the ‘Cognitive Turn’” *AHR* 103:1 (Feb. 1998), p. 57.

⁸⁰ A. Grafton and L. Jardine, *From Humanism to the Humanities* (Harvard U. Press: Cambridge, 1986).

⁸¹ The description of Guarino’s course appears on pp. 9-10; the quote is from page 20.

It is not our intention here to fully relate the Avot exegesis we have been tracking to Renaissance humanism, as the similarity is too amorphous to allow for much exactness. Seeing that Renaissance humanists were paying renewed attention to the language of their classical texts and trying to treat texts as the ancients would have treated them does suggest some relationship to the turn in fifteenth century Jewish exegesis, whether of direct influence or common cultural phenomenon. In listing the factors that might have shaped developments in the world of Avot, then, the intellectual currents of the broader world are worth noting as well.

None of the factors we have named—the Biblical focus of these exegetes, the environment of exegesis they shared with Kanpanton, especially its focus on **הידוש**, Crescas' ideas of the continually renewing Creation, and Renaissance interest in language and close readings of texts—can fully explain the change we have been discussing here. Taken together, however, they shed interesting light on developments in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century Jewish intellectual world. These developments also suggest ways in which we could further this study and thus broaden our understanding of the history of Jewish exegesis, topics we will turn to in the next (and last) chapter.

CONCLUSION: NARRATING A CHANGE AND DEFINING SOME OF ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR JEWISH INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

Having taken all the preliminary steps to writing history-- assembling sources, analyzing them to find where interesting change occurred, proving that the noted change was actually different than what had been before, verifying that it continued to affect people after the generation that witnessed that change, and considering its underlying causes—we can now write the story. With all appropriate caveats, this dissertation has justified recording the following story:

In the early 1400's, rabbinic scholars working independently (as far as we can tell) interpreted Avot and Talmud using rules of interpretation that sharply differed from earlier hermeneutical conventions, but were relatively similar to each other. This hermeneutic assumed that even rabbinic texts were omnisignificant, in which each piece of the text needed to be questioned and interpreted for the meaning that it carried. As this assumption was previously made for Scripture and not rabbinic texts (at least in the medieval period), we have termed this type of exegesis midrashic.

One other noteworthy factor about the new exegesis is its interest in *biddush*, novelty. Both in its early exponents and its later incarnations, adherents of this hermeneutic focused on the need to find novelty in the text's words, as well as in the interpretations the commentator offered.

Within Avot, this style of interpretation first appears in R. Mattityah haYizhari and continues in R. Joseph Hayyun, but the first widely circulated Avot commentary that used it was that of R. Isaac Abarbanel. After that time, midrashic readings can be found in almost all Avot commentaries of the sixteenth century, as we see from reading the famous anthology, *Midrash Shemuel*.

Within Talmud study, the method articulated by R. Isaac Kanpanton was propagated by his students, who headed Talmudic academies throughout Spain and the communities to which Spanish Jews fled after the Expulsion. The fifteenth century change thus dominated Talmud study in the sixteenth century (at least) and has been connected to the method of *pilpul* that ruled Talmud study in Eastern Europe for longer than that.

The first exemplars of the new kind of interpretation, R. Mattityahu haYizhari in Avot and R. Isaac Kanpanton in Talmud study, bear only two known similarities, their cultural milieu and their connection to R. Hasdai Crescas.

The first similarity led D. Boyarin to focus on the views of language prevalent among fifteenth century Spaniards, whether Moslem, Christian, or Jewish. Using the model of the polysystem, in which it is less important to show direct influence than to note ideas that would have been available to all people living in a certain place and time, Boyarin credited the view of Aristotle's theory of language prevalent at the time with instigating the interest in the exact meaning of earlier writer's words.

In that theory, every signifier of language should represent some meaning in the speaker's (or writer's) mind. Applying that theory to a text would then lead the exegete to seek a particular meaning for each part of the text.

Focusing on an aspect of the new exegesis that was perhaps more prominent in the Avot commentaries that we studied, we found that *biddush*, novelty, was a goal of its own, independent of any concern with finding the full or true meaning of the text. While Breuer had assumed that the search for novel interpretation in an already saturated text could lead to new hermeneutics, we found that the interest in *biddush* lasted into the sixteenth century, beyond where saturation of the text would have been a problem.

Realizing their stress on *biddush*, the turn to language (and the use of Aristotelian ideas about language), would seem to have been a *result* of the need to innovate, not the cause of it. Whether that urge was based on Crescas' view of eternal Creation or haYizhari arrived at the connection between his own creativity and God's in some other way, the role of *biddush* in the process should not be ignored.

With or without the connection to Crescas, our history tells of a turn away from original meaning of texts towards midrashic ones. It provides an example of the kind of cultural history that Moshe Rosman recently called for, one that uses "description that is 'thick' and interpretation that is 'deep'"¹ to further our understanding of figures from the past. Rosman adds the importance, in his view, of the psychological perspective of Jerome Bruner, who, in attempting to define cultural psychology speaks of trying to

show how human minds and lives are reflections of culture and history...focus upon the *meanings* in terms of which Self is defined *both* by the individual *and* by the culture in which he or she participates...²

That view of cultural history motivated the study we have just completed, thickly describing the reading strategies of various readers of Avot to derive how they constructed the meaning of texts for themselves. In and of itself, that is a modest piece of intellectual history, a part of more fully understanding the intellectual world of fifteenth century Jewish thinkers.

Its broader interest becomes clearer when we consider the importance of hermeneutics for other aspects of Jewish intellectual history, fifteenth century or otherwise. Considering just a few of those areas will demonstrate the point. The suggestion we made in the last chapter, that haYizhari, Hayyun, and Abarbanel may have been influenced by their primary focus in Biblical commentary, for example, raises the question of which rabbinic scholars had a central discipline that governed their view of all texts, and which moved fluidly between types of literature, applying to each its own hermeneutical rules.

Categorizing scholars in this way will necessarily enrich historians' appreciation of their intellectual milieu. Knowing that some Tosafists, for example, analyzed aggadah with the same dialectical tools they used on legal portions of the Talmud, reflects on their intellectual biography as much as when we note others who changed their hermeneutic for each type of text they studied.

Realizing the parallel between Avot exegesis and Kanpanton's Talmud interpretation changed our picture of Kanpanton's innovation itself, and also opened a new window on fifteenth century Jewish intellectual history generally. The centrality of *biddush* was stated most explicitly by the Avot commentators we analyzed; only after that were we sensitized to its presence in Kanpanton's work as well.

Seeing a change in Avot and Talmudic exegesis should make us wonder which other disciplines changed among fifteenth century Spanish Jews. We noted, in the course of the study, that haYizhari, Hayyun, and Abarbanel interpreted Scripture with many of the same exegetical rules as we found in their Avot commentaries. One step would be to see whether their Biblical exegesis was also innovative, or whether there they were simply following convention.

Another relevant discipline is that of *derashot*, public sermons. M. Saperstein noted that the structure of sermons changed substantially in the middle of the fifteenth century in Spain, "in a process that cannot yet be fully documented or explained."³ Although sermon structure was fairly fluid up until the middle of the fifteenth century, sermons tended to open by quoting a verse from anywhere in Scripture other than the section of the Torah read that week in synagogue, fully interpreting that verse, and then showing how it related to the portion of the week.

¹ M. Rosman, "A Prolegomenon to the Study of Jewish Cultural History," *Jewish Studies Internet Journal* 1(2002), pp. 109-127, p. 109.

² *ibid.*, citing J. Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 116.

³ M. Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching 1200-1800, An Anthology* (Yale U. Press: New Haven, 1989), p. 66ff.

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In the middle of the fifteenth century, preachers began to instead open with a verse from that week's Torah lesson. Too, instead of studying the verse as a whole, they began to break the theme-verse "into fragments, sometimes only two words in length" with "each short phrase" being "given separate interpretation."⁴ While Saperstein specifically mentions that haYizhari did *not* use this new style,⁵ it sounds remarkably reminiscent of the scholars we have studied, with their insistence that each word and letter carries some significance of its own.

Obviously, this one fact does not mean anything without further study, but seeing an unexplained change in preaching that has even a minimal parallel to what we have studied here calls for further study of any connection.

Moving away from fifteenth century Spain, historians are realizing the importance of understanding a scholar's innate hermeneutical rules in writing history. As Rosman points out, understanding the cultural development of Polish Jewry, as evidenced in R. Moses Isserles' *Mappa* (his glosses on Karo's *Shulhan Arukh*), depends on understanding "how much of his [Isserles'] citation of halakhic sources is particularly sixteenth century or particularly Polish?"⁶ Setting up a baseline of what an "ordinary" interpretation would look like in each time and place would help historians better identify places where a rabbi ventured outside ordinary interpretation for some other purpose. We have here offered one example of how to set up such a baseline.

One more example comes from a recent article by E. Fram.⁷ Fram proves that R. Joel Sirkes, Bah, answered the same question in two different ways at different points in his career. His enlightening discussion focuses centrally on proving that Bah was not engaging in ordinary halakhic thinking when he made these rulings. He does so by showing that Bah adopted almost diametrically opposed reasoning in the two responsa, ruled differently in these responsa than he had in his commentary on *Tur*, and enunciated new halakhic claims that fit only poorly with the existing halakhic literature.

That method of identifying the impact of external factors on *halakhic* decisions only works when the halakhist left significant clues as to the difference of this response from others, as was the case here.⁸ Developing a fuller knowledge of various rabbis' hermeneutics, however, would ease the process of identifying when they were stepping outside their usual parameters of proper exegesis.

What is true of the individual is true of groups or streams of thought as well. One of the central interests of Jewish intellectual history is the source of thinkers' ideas about their religion. One aid to achieving that goal is the recent willingness to speak of the polysystem, to see that ideas that are available in a culture can be seen as influential even without establishing a direct link among the various people, often from different subcultures within that society, who adopted that idea or one of its ramifications.⁹

We here have sought to advance the understanding of intellectual developments by working in another direction, deepening historians' comprehension of what each author would have "naturally" assumed about the texts in front of him. Those enlighten us as to where he would have

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 69. Saperstein calls the origin of this technique "one of the great enigmas in Jewish homiletics."

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 65 and the sermon, pp. 156-66.

⁶ Rosman, p. 114.

⁷ E. Fram, "Two Cases of Adultery and the Halakhic Decision-Making Process," *AJSReview* 26:2 (2002), pp. 277-300.

⁸ In "Can Halakhic Texts Talk History?" p. 174-5, H. Soloveitchik spoke of "detecting an angle of deflection," his term for the need to prove that a scholar could not have arrived at the interpretation he did unless something extraneous impinged on him, consciously or unconsciously. This study has tried to show that as the rules of interpretation changed, the task of discovering an angle of detection became that much more difficult, since texts came to have so many more meanings. On the other hand, many of those meanings were more clearly tinged with personal elements.

⁹ Boyarin, p. 17, Rosman, p. 117.

thought of himself as “simply” responding to the classical texts of tradition, finding or uncovering the truth embedded in a particular text (or at least one of those truths).

As we increase our understanding of what authors thought as they were reading, and reading into, classical texts, we will inherently extend our understanding of the relationship between Jews and those texts throughout their history. Towards that end, this study has been one step.

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