

Moses's Prayer and the *Nimshal* as Scriptural Mosaic

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1 The *Nimshal* in Rabbinic Literature

Aggadic midrashic literature frequently features parables followed by an application or moral lesson, in Hebrew a “nimshal,” which presents the essential message of the passage. The structure of a properly detailed *nimshal* should follow the structure found in the *mashal* itself. To use the words of David Stern, “the invention of the *nimshal* is the first and most important feature of the process of regularisation the *mashal* has undergone in midrashic literature.”¹ The point of the *nimshal* is to replace the literary context of the *mashal* and to aid in its comprehension.

At the same time, the *mashal* often lacks accordance with its *nimshal*. This lack could be explained as a lack of meticulousness in the literary creation of the sages, who perhaps did not view the literary structure of the *mashal* to be of paramount importance. Alternatively, it could be viewed as an intentional strategy intended to transform the *mashal* into a less anticipated source and to create an exegesis with a more complicated and deeper meaning.

The *nimshal*, as it appears in aggadic midrashim, usually includes a verse or several verses that aid the *darshan* and his audience in understanding the full exegetical meaning of the *mashal*'s topic. These verses are commonly combined in a simple and trivial fashion in the rhetoric of the *nimshal* and their connection to it is clear. However, at times we find strange or unusual choices for the supporting verses in the context of the *nimshal*. To understand this phenomenon, we need to focus our gaze more sharply on these verses and, in particular, on their biblical context. Deeper analysis can lead to a greater understanding of what seem to be the strange choices made by the *darshan* or the midrashic editor.

In this article, I will focus on one particular case, that of a *nimshal* found following a parable in the midrash on Ps 90 in *Midrash Tehillim*, further referred

¹ David Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 18–19.

to as Midrash on Psalms. I will show that although the verses used in the *nimshal* seem to be entirely inappropriate for the *mashal*, on deeper analysis we can sense that the *darshan* or editor used these verses on purpose to broaden the scope of the entire *mashal*. Before I begin to analyze this *derashah*, I will offer a brief survey on Midrash on Psalms and the state of its scholarly textual reconstruction.

2 The Text of Midrash on Psalms

Midrash on Psalms is a comprehensive aggadic midrash on the Book of Psalms, consisting of literary units bearing different linguistic and literary styles. Scholars have suggested various evaluations as to the time and place in which this composition was created, as well as the nature of its editing.² It is clear that its core consists of early Tannaitic and Amoraic material. However, the composition known to us today underwent substantial and late editing, in all likelihood down to the end of the Byzantine period in Palestine.³ The midrash seems to have enjoyed widespread distribution throughout the medieval Jewish world and thus a relatively large number of manuscripts have

2 For a general survey of the history of Midrash on Psalms scholarship, see: Leopold Zunz, *Ha-Derashot be-Yisra'el ve-hishtalshelutan ha-historit*, ed. Chanoch Albeck (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1947), 131–133 (Hebrew); Günter Stemberger, *Einleitung in Talmud und Midrasch*, 9th ed. (Munich: Beck, 2011), 358–359; Myron B. Lerner, “The Works of Aggadic Midrash and the Esther Midrashim,” in *The Literature of the Sages*, vol. 2, *Midrash and Targum, Liturgy, Poetry, Mysticism, Contracts, Inscriptions, Ancient Science and the Languages of Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Shmuel Safrai, Ze'ev Safrai, Joshua Schwartz, and Peter J. Tomson, CRINT 2/3 (Assen: Van Gorcum; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 165; Anat Reizel, *Introduction to the Midrashic Literature* (Alon Shevut: Tevnot, 2011), 281–291 (Hebrew).

3 Some scholars of previous generations viewed Midrash on Psalms as an early work, created by the sages of the first centuries CE, and found various pieces of evidence for this claim in rabbinic literature. For instance, R. Hiyya relates that he “would look at the ‘aggadah’ on Psalms” which could indicate that he was examining a written book containing midrashim on Psalms (Gen. Rab. 33:3, [Theodor-Albeck 307]; y. Kil. 9:2 [32b]; y. Ketub. 12:3 [35a]). Clearly, this and other, similar evidence does not prove the early existence of the midrash known to us today, but only the existence of some early midrash on Psalms whose connection to that familiar to us is unclear. While it is impossible to rule out the possibility that this early midrash is the core of the midrash known to us, it is abundantly clear that the midrash we know underwent numerous and late editorial changes. The basic impression from the style and language of Midrash Psalms is that it is a Palestinian composition edited towards the end of the Byzantine period (around the seventh century) and expanded, at least in some textual witnesses, with many additions, some under the influence of the Babylonian Talmud. One of the signs of the early nature of this midrash is that even where it contains parallels to classical rabbinic sources, it preserves early and unique versions of those *derashot*.

survived, both partial and full. The midrash was first printed in Constantinople in 1512, and then multiple times based on the same version. In 1890, Solomon Buber published a new version based on the eight manuscripts available to him.⁴ Despite Buber's substantial contribution to scholarly research on Midrash on Psalms, the reconstruction of the text is still far from complete. Buber, who chose a "diplomatic" presentation of the text (which is more accurately described as a best-text edition), based his version mainly on the Parma manuscript and deviated from it only when forced to do so.⁵ Buber did not offer much in terms of analytic comparison between the various textual witnesses, nor did he present a scientific account of his choice for the Parma manuscript as the basis of his version. Thus, there is no particular reason to view his edition as an improvement on the earlier printed edition.

Beyond the question of the quality of existing editions, today we have available textual witnesses that were unknown to earlier generations of scholars, including full and partial manuscripts discovered in the Cairo Genizah. The existence of these witnesses requires new analysis of the composition's text. Comprehensive analysis of the entirety of the composition's textual witnesses, both direct and indirect, has already demonstrated that there are numerous significant variations between them, and that the content itself often varies substantially between manuscripts. Such a phenomenon makes it difficult even to determine the parameters of the original composition.⁶ The findings that emerge from this article and others exemplify the great importance of creating a new edition of Midrash on Psalms that will give appropriate expression to its various textual traditions.⁷

4 Salomon Buber, ed. *Midrash Tehillim* (Wilna, 1890; repr. Jerusalem, 1966).

5 Found in the Palatine library, Parma Italy, Cod. Parm. 2552. This manuscript is written in Sephardi script and seems to have been penned in Italy during the fourteenth century. See Benjamin Richler, ed., *Hebrew Manuscripts in the Biblioteca Palatina in Parma: Catalogue* (Jerusalem: Jewish National and University Library, 2001), 143.

6 Albeck, 132, 477n6, noted that "the manuscripts of this midrash, as is possible to see from the Buber edition, substantially differ one from the other and contain so many additions that finding the core of the midrash and the earliest version that was created by its editor or editors is impossible."

7 In recent years, I have been leading a large-scale research project focussing on the reconstruction of Midrash on Psalms. This project has allowed me to arrive at the findings that underlie this article, and has been funded with a grant from the Israel Science Foundation (ISF 1907/17). I would like to thank my colleagues, Dr Elhanan Shiloh, Ben-Zion Eshel, and Dr Yonatan Sagiv, who have worked tirelessly and thoroughly in entering these texts into the database. As far as I know, there are two others working on the text of Midrash on Psalms. The first is Mordecai Silverstein, who has related to me that he has been working on this for over twenty years. His work has yet to be published, but hopefully will be in the future. Additional work on the text of Midrash on Psalms is being conducted in Germany and will eventually lead to a synoptic edition of the composition; see Therese Hansberger, Gottfried

3 Psalm 90 in Rabbinic Literature

Before we approach the *mashal* itself, let us take a brief look at its overall context. Psalm 90, the opening Psalm of the fourth book of Psalms, is unique in that its title ascribes it to Moses: “A prayer of Moses, the man of God.”⁸

Rabbinic exegetical strategy dictates that this prayer must have been uttered at one of the events of Moses’s life. As such, Tannaitic literature employs two different exegetical interpretations of the biblical narrative that best serve as the setting for this prayer. According to the first of these exegetical moves, found in a number of classical sources, including *Seder Olam*, the *Tosefta*, and the halakhic midrashim, the Psalm’s concluding verse, “May the favor of the Lord, our God, be upon us” (Ps 90:17), connects the Psalm to Moses’s blessing upon the conclusion of the building of the tabernacle:

“And when Moses saw all the work that they had performed it as the Lord had commanded them, thus did they do, that Moses blessed them” (Ex 39:43). With what blessing did he bless them? He said to them: “May it be His will that the Shechinah repose upon the work of your hands”. And they responded, “May the favor of the Lord our God be upon us”.

Ps 90:17⁹

וירא משה את כל המלאכה והנה עשו אותה
כאשר צוה ה' כן עשו ויברך אותם משה"
(שמות לט 43)—מה ברכה ברכם?
אמר להם: יהי רצון שתשרה שכינה במעשה
ידיכם, והם אומרים: "ויהי נועם ה' אלהינו
עלינו ומעשה ידינו כוננה עלינו ומעשה ידינו
כוננהו" (תהלים צ 17). (ספרי במדבר קמג).

Reeg, and Gert Wildensee, ed., *Midrash Tehillim: Kolumnensynoptische Edition auf Basis der erhaltenen Handschriften, Fragmente und frühen Drucke*, 2 vols., TSAJ (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, forthcoming).

8 There is a significant amount of scholarly literature on this Psalm and its ascription to Moses. See, for example: Richard J. Clifford, “Psalm 90: Wisdom Meditation or Communal Lament?,” in *The Book of Psalms: Composition and Reception*, ed. Patrick D. Miller and Peter W. Flint, VTSup 99 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 190–205; Geoffrey W. Grogan, *Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 107; Stephen B. Dawes, “But Jesus Believed That David wrote the Psalms ...,” in *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Authority of Scripture: Historical, Biblical, and Theoretical Perspectives*, ed. Carlos R. Bovell (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 168–170; Clinton J. McCann, “The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter: Psalms in Their Literary Context,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Psalms*, ed. William P. Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 350–362.

9 Sifre Num. 143 (Menahem Kahana, ed., *Sifre on Numbers: An Annotated Edition*, 4 vols. [Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2011], 4, 480, and his commentary on p. 1187); *Seder Olam Rab. 6* (Chaim Milikowsky, ed., *Seder Olam: Critical Edition, Commentary, and Introduction*, 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben Zvi, 2013), 1, 240, and his commentary on vol. 2, 131; t. Menah. 7:8.

Moses's prayer, alluded to in the Psalm's title, was offered when the erection of the tabernacle was completed, a one-time event appropriate for a prayer that God's presence should dwell among the people of Israel.

The second exegetical move that appears in Tannaitic literature connects this Psalm to the blessing Moses recited at the end of his life. This exegetical move is based on the appellation "the man of God," which appears in the title of the Psalm. This same appellation is given to Moses close to the end of Deuteronomy: "And this is the blessing [with which Moses, the man of God, bade the Israelites farewell before he died]" (Deut 33:1). This adds to a previous blessing. And which is that? "A prayer of Moses, the man of G-d" (Ps 90:1).¹⁰

According to this understanding, Ps 90 documents the prayer Moses recited on the eve of his death, immediately before the blessing he gave to the tribes of Israel found at the end of Deuteronomy. This context of Moses's prayer shares some attributes with the other context, as a blessing upon the completion of the tabernacle. The juxtaposition with Moses's blessing indicates that here too it is read as a prayer of praise to God, and a plea for the future of the children of Israel.

In Midrash on Psalms, both of these identifications of Moses's prayer with important events in his life do indeed appear. However, they play a relatively minor role. In contrast, at the core of the midrashic chapter on this Psalm, a third exegetical context for his prayer comes to the fore. According to this exegetical understanding, Moses's prayer in this Psalm is the prayer he offered to God for the salvation of his people after their sin with the golden calf. This interpretation lies at the heart of the many *derashot* that emphasize the boldness of Moses's prayer and the motif of his grievance against God.¹¹

4 Moses: Father of Those Who Pray

With this introduction in mind, I wish to closely examine one of the *derashot* on Ps 90. This *derashah* is designed as an exegetical *mashal* meant to explain the unique phrase "Moses, the man of God":

10 Sifre Deut. 342 (Finkelstein 393).

11 For a broader discussion of the literary redaction of the Midr. Ps. 90, see: Arnon Atzmon, "The Prayers of Moses: A Study of Midrash Tehillim on Psalm 90," *Sidra* (forthcoming).

“A prayer of Moses the man of God.” Scripture need have said no more than “A prayer of Moses.” What does that mean, “the man of God”?

A parable of a king who became angry at his son and sought to kill him. But when his friend [אוהבו] said to him: I beg you, pardon him, and do not kill him, the king halted and did not kill his son. The next day the king said: Had I slain my son; I would have harmed myself. Therefore, may my friend who pleaded for mercy for my son be remembered for good; hereafter I shall make him father of kings.

Just so, when the Holy One, blessed be He, said, “Let me alone, that I may destroy them” (Deut. 9:14), Moses said to him, “If You would deal thus with me, kill me rather, I beg You” (Num 11:15). And after this verse, Scripture says, “I have pardoned according to your word” (Num 14:20). And so the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses: Had I destroyed Israel, I would have harmed Myself, and therefore I am grateful to Moses who asked for Mercy for them, as it is said, “And Moses besought the Lord his God” (Ex. 32:11). I shall therefore confer greatness upon Moses, I shall name him father of prophets, father of angels, father of those who pray. Hence, “A prayer of Moses the man of God” (Ps 90:1).

Midr. Ps. 90:1 [Buber 390]

The passage opens with an exegetical question: why is Moses described here as a “man of God?” This question forms the starting point for the *mashal* itself.

“תפלה למשה איש האלהים”—לא היה צריך לומר אלא “תפלה למשה” מהו “איש האלהים”?

משל למלך שכעס על בנו וביקש להורגו ואמר לו אוהבו: בבקשה ממך מחול לו ואל תהרגהו. עמד ולא הרגו. למחר התחיל המלך לומר: אילו הרגתי את בני לעצמי הייתי מכשיל אלא זכור לטוב אוהבי שביקש עליו רחמים ומעכשיו אני עושה אותו אב למלכים.

כך אמר הקב"ה: הרף ממני ואשמידם (דברים ט 14).

אמר ליה משה: “אם ככה את עושה לי הרגני נא הרוג” (במדבר יא 15) ומה כתיב בתריה? “ויאמר ה' סלחתי כדבריך” (במדבר יד 20).

אחר כך אמר לו הקב"ה למשה: אילו הרגתי את ישראל לעצמי הייתי מכשיל אלא מחזיק אני טובה למשה שביקש עליהם רחמים שנאמר “ויחל משה” (שמות לב 11) אני עושה לו גדולה קורא אני לו אב לגביאים אב למלאכים אב למתפללים.

הוי “תפלה למשה איש האלהים” (תהלים ז 1).

The assumption that underlies the *mashal* is that the Psalm's title, "A prayer of Moses," refers to a prayer in which Moses saved the people from God's wrath. From this perspective, this *derashah* continues the direction set in the previous *derashot* and is built upon them. In other words, this *derashah* does not deal with the foundational question: which prayer is the Psalm referring to? Rather, it is asking only the secondary question: what did Moses do to merit being called "the man of God"?

The *mashal* utilizes the frequent image of Moses as God's beloved friend or advisor¹² who intercedes on behalf of the king's son after the king has sentenced his own son to death for having angered him. The king, who answers the pleas of his confidant, later remembers this intercession with favour, for by stopping the king from enacting his wrath, the friend has prevented the king from "harming himself" and killing his son. As a reward, the king appoints his friend to be "father of kings," that is, an elevated advisor who will serve as father for all kings.

The *derashah* continues with the detailed *nimshal* which is accompanied by several prooftexts. However, the choice of verses in the *nimshal* is extremely perplexing, as I shall show. The *nimshal* is constructed of five passages, each of which has an accompanying prooftext:

The first passage is a description of the king's actions. God is angry at Israel and wishes to destroy them; the verse cited is "Let Me alone and I will destroy them" (Deut 9:14). This verse is part of Moses's speech describing the events that follow the sin with the golden calf. The verse parallels the words of God in Exod 32:9–10: "Now, let Me be, that My anger may blaze forth against them and that I may destroy them." Both verses express in a similar manner that God has decided to destroy his children, and thus it is unclear why the *darshan* chose the verse in Deuteronomy from Moses's speech and not the verse from Exodus.

The second passage is a description of the friend's response. Moses prays for the people. The verse cited is "If You would deal thus with me, kill me" (Num 11:15), which documents Moses's response to the complaints of the people at *Qivrot Hata'avah* (Graves of Lust). The *darshan's* choice of this verse is completely surprising. Not only is the verse irrelevant to Moses's prayer after the sin with the golden calf, it also does not reflect a prayer for the salvation of the people. Rather, it is Moses's complaint that he can no longer bear the

12 On the realistic background of this image, see: Samuel Krauss, *Persia and Rome in Talmud and Midrash* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1948), 135, 141 (Hebrew). Alan Appelbaum argues that the Hebrew *'ahuv* is used in the same way Latin writers used the term *amicus*, namely to mean "client"; see Alan Appelbaum, "Hidden Transcripts in King-Parables: Windows on Rabbinic Resistance to Rome," *JSQ* 17 (2010): 289n5. While it is possible to accept Appelbaum's translation in some contexts, in our parable it seems less fitting since the relations between this *ohavo* and the king are not just formal.

weight of carrying his people. Moreover, both places describing Moses's prayer after the sin with the calf contain verses that could easily have fit into this *derashah*: "But Moses implored the Lord his God" (Exod 32:11), "And I prayed to the Lord" (Deut 9:26).

The third passage is the decision of the king to have mercy on his people. The verse cited is "And the Lord said: 'I have forgiven as you have requested,'" which documents God's response to Moses after the sin of the spies (Num 14:20). Again, the choice of proof-text is entirely perplexing; why did the *darshan* or an editor switch to the story of the spies when he had a more or less parallel verse in the context of the sin with the golden calf: "And the Lord renounced the punishment He had planned to bring on His people" (Exod 32)? Moreover, the verse in Exodus, "And God renounced," is even closer to the sequence of events that occur in the *mashal*: the king regrets his original intention to kill his son. The verse could easily have fit into one of the links in the *nimshal*, but it is not there.

The fourth passage is the king's justification of his beloved's intercession which ultimately prevented the king from harming himself: "I am grateful to Moses who asked for Mercy for them." The midrash cites the verse "But Moses implored the LORD his God" (Exod 32:11), a verse taken from Moses's prayer after the sin with the golden calf in Exodus. Here it is not even clear what the function of the proof-text is. The proof-text seems to repeat a motif that has already been explained, Moses's prayer, and adds nothing that we do not already know. The verse does not offer any support to the theme of God's repayment to Moses or even praise if Moses for the aid he provided to God.

The fifth passage is the reward given to the king's beloved: "I shall therefore confer greatness upon him, I shall name him father of prophets, father of angels, father of those who pray." The proof-text is the title of the Psalm: "This is what it means, 'A prayer of Moses, the man of God.'" In other words, Moses's reward for preventing God from "harming Himself" is his appointment as "father of prophets" and, according to some versions, even "father of angels."¹³ This brings a new and bold interpretation of the phrase "the man of God": Moses is elevated above the angels and becomes almost like God.¹⁴

13 The phrase "father of angels" (אב למלאכים), which is retained in the Buber edition, appears only in ms Parma 2552, on which Buber's edition is based. Other textual witnesses have the phrase of "father of prophets" or also the phrase of "father of kings" (אב למלכים).

14 A possible background for this midrashic move is an interpretive concept which reads the words "man of God" in the sense of divinization of Moses. Indeed, other sermons in the same passage also go in this direction and identify divine parts in Moses. Section E, for example, reads: "When he [Moses] When Moses went up on high ... he was called God," and the like. On this trend, see Wayne A. Meeks, "Moses as God and King," in *Religions in*

Clearly, this *nimshal* contains a surprising number of verses that do not seem to be relevant to the setting in which the midrash imagines the Psalm's prayer to have been uttered. To summarize: The midrash opens with a verse from Moses's speech in Deuteronomy, "Let Me alone and I will destroy them," which describes God's words after the sin with the calf. The midrash continues with Moses's words after the sin of the grumblers in the book of Numbers, "kill me," meant to reflect Moses's pleas to God to have mercy on His people. The midrash completes this link with the verse "And the Lord said, 'I have forgiven as you have requested,'" which describes God's response after the sin with the spies. The midrash concludes with a verse from Exodus, "But Moses implored the LORD his God," meant to express God's praise for Moses for having prevented God from harming Himself at the sin with the calf and completes the idea with the verse from Psalms, "A prayer of Moses, the man of God," which expresses Moses's reward. The complexity of this situation speaks for itself—the strange *mishmash* of prooftexts composing the *nimshal* which follows the *mashal* is truly puzzling.

How can we comprehend this situation? Why didn't the *darshan* build the *nimshal* in a logical and coherent fashion based on verses appropriate to the historical setting to which he ascribed the Psalm—the sin with the golden calf? Why didn't he use the appropriate verses from Exodus?

We could perhaps seek specific reasons to explain why each one of these verses was chosen, whether the particular style of the verse or its appropriateness for the framework of the *nimshal*. For instance, "Let Me alone and I will destroy them" (הָרַף מִמֶּנִּי וְאֶשְׂמִידֵם) in Deuteronomy is a short, sharp statement and therefore more appropriate than "Now, let Me be" (וְעַתָּה הַנְּחֵה לִּי וַיַּחַר אַפִּי) in Exodus. The verse "I have pardoned according to your word" (סָלַחְתִּי כְדַבְרֶיךָ) in Num 14:20 is a more pointed expression of the King's forgiveness than the parallel verse at the sin with the golden calf, "And the Lord renounced" (וַיִּנָּחֵם ה') in Exod 32:14.

However, I do not believe these isolated justifications are sufficient to solve the complete lack of coherence in these citations, and they certainly cannot help us understand why the verse "kill me, rather" (הֲרַגְנִי נָא הַרְוֵג) was introduced as an expression of Moses's prayer when stronger and more relevant verses were easily available to express this theme.

It seems, therefore, that behind the choice of the *darshan* or editor stands a broader intention whose purpose is to expand our conception of "Moses's

Antiquity: Essays in Memory of Erwin Ramsdell Goodenough, ed. Jacob Neusner, SHR 14 (Leiden: Brill, 1968), 354–371, who understands the Midrash to read the phrase "Man of God" in the sense of "Man and God," and compared this motif to similar motifs in Philo and in Samaritan literature.

prayer” to include all situations in which Moses stood by his people’s side and pleaded on their behalf before God. According to this understanding, the prayer referred to in the Psalm was not a one-time event that saved the son of the King, as we would be led to believe in the *mashal*. Rather, the prayer is characteristic of Moses’s consistent behaviour as defender of the nation.¹⁵ The *darshan* or editor’s choice to use this method to weave together different moments in which Moses prayed was based on his reading of Moses’s speech in Deut 9, where Moses himself brought together different events in which the Israelites sinned and he interceded with God on their behalf.

Up until now, I have attempted to reconstruct the *mashal*’s creation, to take a peek into the midrashic editor’s workshop by examining his choice of prooftexts for the *nimshal*. I have suggested that the *darshan* or editor strove to express Moses’s intercessory activity in as broad a manner as possible, and not to limit God’s praise for him to the context of the sin of the golden calf.

It might be possible to strengthen this suggestion by focussing on another aspect of the *mashal*: the portrayal of Moses as “the friend of the king.” One of the sources of this image is a *mashal* found in Sifre Numbers on the verse “And the people cried out to Moses” (Num 11:2), which appears in the context of the people complaining in the wilderness:

How could Moses help them? It would have been fitting to say, “And the people cried out to the Lord?” So why does Scripture say, “And the people cried out to Moses”?

R. Shimon would say: A parable to a king who was angry with his son. The son went to the king’s friend and said to him: Please intercede for me with father. Thus, Israel went to Moses and said to him: Please intercede for us with the Lord.¹⁶

Sifre Num. 86:1 [Kahana 216]

וכי מה היה משה מועילם והלא אין ראוי לומר אלא ויצעק העם אל ה' ומה תלמוד לומר "ויצעק העם אל משה"? היה ר' שמעון אומר: משל למה הדבר דומה למלך בשר ודם שכעס על בנו והלך לו הבן ההוא אצל אוהבו של מלך אמר לו צא ובקש לי מאבא כך הלכו ישראל אל משה אמרו לו בקש עלינו מלפני המקום (ספרי במדבר פו).

15 On the role of Moses’s prayers in defending Israel, see: Michael Widmer, *Moses, God, and the Dynamics of Intercessory Prayer: A Study of Exodus 32–34 and Numbers 13–14*, FAT 2/8 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004); Michael Widmer, *Standing in the Breach: An Old Testament Theology and Spirituality of Intercessory Prayer* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 57–171; Christine E. Hayes, “Golden Calf Stories: The Relationship of Exodus 32 and Deuteronomy 9–10,” in *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel*, ed. Hindy Najman and Judith H. Newman, JSJSup 83 (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 45–93.

16 See also Kahana’s commentary, 1012.

Here, in the older midrash, we find again the image of the king's beloved praying for the king to have mercy on his son. However, in this version of the *mashal*, the beloved prays only after he has been requested to do so by the king's son who fears for his life. This *mashal* is meant to negate a misunderstanding of the verse "And the people cried out to Moses," namely that the people prayed directly to Moses, that Moses could bring them salvation. The intent of the *mashal* is to clarify that the people turned to Moses, friend of the king, in order for him to pray to God on their behalf.

This foundational image was adopted by the *darshan* or editor of Midrash on Psalms, and modified so that the friend himself initiates the intercessory prayer. The son's role in approaching the king's beloved was muted. Furthermore, the dramatic point was moved from the prayer itself to the moments following the king's forgiveness of his son—the king praises and elevates the friend. This is the main addition in Midrash on Psalms and it comes to explain "Moses, the man of God."¹⁷ We should note that Midrash on Psalms preserves not only the terminology used to refer to the main images in the *mashal*, "The king who was angered by his son, the beloved who interceded on behalf of the son," but also the exegetical terminology, "It was not necessary to say anything but ... [להלא אין ראוי לומר אלא] / It would have been fitting to say ... [לא היה צריך לומר]; What does Scripture mean [ומה תלמוד לומר] / what does it mean [מהו]?" These remnants of the earlier contexts reveal that the *darshan* or editor was taking older material and refashioning it according to his own exegetical and ideological goals.¹⁸

Elsewhere, Midrash on Psalms itself cites the classic image of Moses as defender of his people, an image appropriate to Moses after the sin with the golden calf. This interpretation is found in the comment on the following verse:

17 It is possible that the translation should read: "Moses man-god." This line of interpretation also explains why God would have harmed Himself when killing Moses (not the people). One could also assume an anti-Christian polemic here, as if to say: We, Jews, also have our divine man!

18 In that context, see also the parable in Mekh. R. Ishm. Vayehi 3 (Horovitz-Rabin 98). See also Lieve M. Teugels, *The Meshalim in the Mekhilot: An Annotated Edition and Translation of the Parables in Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael and Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai*, TSAJ 176 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 159–166. The versions there differ in the title given to the person "coming in," as some read "אפיטרופו," (his) guardian, and others "אוהבו," his beloved/friend.

“He would have destroyed them had not Moses His chosen one confronted Him in the breach to avert His destructive wrath” (Ps 106:23):

R. Berechiah said: [This is similar] to a prosecutor who was making accusations against the son of the king. What did the defender [סניגור] do? He thrust him aside and stood in his place. Similarly, “He would destroy them, had not Moses his chosen [בחירו] stood before him in the breach to turn back his wrath” (Ps 106:23).

Midr. Ps. 106:23 [Buber 456]

“ויאמר להשמדם לולי משה בחירו עמד בפרץ לפניו להשיב חמתו מהשחית” (תהלים קו כג).

ר' ברכיה אמר: לקטיגור שהוא מקטרג על בנו של מלך מה עשה סניגור דחה אותו ועמד עצמו במקומו כך “לולי משה בחירו עמד בפרץ לפניו להשיב חמתו מהשחית” (מדרש תהלים קו בובר עמ' 456).

This amoraic *derashah* portrays Moses as defending Israel in a bold and brazen manner, pushing aside the prosecutor. This portrayal emphasizes Moses's defence of his people after their sin but does not sufficiently express Moses's intimacy with God. To achieve this desired result, in other words to transform Moses from “defender” into “beloved friend,” the editor of Midr. Ps. 90 borrowed the image of the “friend of the King” from the passage concerning the grumblers in the Sifre. This passage better expresses Moses's intimacy with God and the praise bestowed on him as “the man of God.”

This reconstruction of the work of the Midrash editor may explain why he chose to use verses not only from the sin with the golden calf, but also those related to other events such as Israel's grumbling in the wilderness, when Moses attempted to deflect God's anger by pleading, “kill me rather.”

In the end, this is one of many examples showing the in-depth analysis required to understand the parables found in the exegetical context of aggadic midrashim. Both the images and terminology found in the parables themselves, as well as the *nimshal* portions of the parables and the prooftexts they use, reveal a broad and rich expanse of hidden meanings.

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