

Solomonic Wisdom vs. the Letter of the Law: A Midrashic Reading

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Shemot Rabbah, in its opening to *parashat Va'era*, offers a beautiful meditation on the law: the letter of the law, the spirit of the law, and the laws of nature. In exploring that midrashic passage, I will first engage its rich intertextual, literary account of an error made by Shlomo ha-Melekh, and then consider what the broader polemical point of the midrash might be.

Unexpectedly, this midrash appears in the context of God's first revelation to Moshe with His true name, in *Shemot* 6:2.

וידבר אלוקים אל משה ויאמר אליו אני ה', וארא אל אברהם אל יצחק, הה"ד
 (קהלת ב) ופניתי אני לראות חכמה והוללות וסכלות כי מה האדם שיבא אחרי
 המלך את אשר כבר עשהו.

As *midrashim* often do, this midrash begins by citing a verse from elsewhere in Tanakh, which will be brought into conversation with the *parashah* by the end.¹

Our midrash engages a verse narrating the long journey of Kohelet, where he turns to find “wisdom, madness, and stupidity; for which person can come after the king, after they [the king] already acted?” (Eccl. 2:12)

¹ This opening style is the opposite of the standard (and somewhat dull) sermonic opening line, “in this week’s *parashah*.” *Hazal* often go out of their way to start *not* in this week’s *parashah* but elsewhere, in order to demonstrate the interconnectedness of Torah and to build anticipation for how the verses connect.

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The verse's overall meaning is obscure, and it is especially confusing how these three categories—wisdom, madness, and stupidity—are conflated as areas of study, only to be rejected. Presumably, it would be reasonable to distinguish between them: to value wisdom and to reject madness and stupidity. Instead, Kohelet rejects them all, the reason being that it is not a person's place to reject that which the king already carried out. This obscure verse is the starting point and basis of this midrash's exegesis.

הפסוק הזה נאמר על שלמה ועל משה.

The midrash announces that it will offer two interpretations of this verse, one regarding Shlomo² and the other Moshe. Of course, the connection to *parashat Va'era*, involving Moshe, is reserved for last, in order to hold the audience in suspense for longer before returning to the *parashah*.

על שלמה כיצד כשנתן הקדוש ברוך הוא תורה לישראל נתן בה מצות עשה ומצות לא תעשה ונתן למלך מקצת מצות שנא' (דברים יז) לא ירבה לו סוסים וכסף וזהב וגו', ולא ירבה לו נשים ולא יסור לבבו, עמד שלמה המלך והחכים על גזירתו של הקדוש ברוך הוא ואמר למה אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא לא ירבה לו נשים לא בשביל שלא יסור לבבו אני ארבה ולבי לא יסור.

The king in this sense is a microcosm of the Jewish People. Just as the Jewish People received both positive and negative commandments, the king was given a focused subset of commandments as well (although they were primarily negative): not to increase his horses or wealth and not to have too many wives.

Shlomo ha-Melekh, however, thought that he could outsmart God's decree. Invoking the *ta'ama di-kra*, he reasoned that if the only problem with multiplying wives was that the king's heart would go astray, if he knew for certain that he would *not* veer from the proper path there would be no problem marrying multiple wives.

This presumption, and presumptuousness, that he would be exempt from the prohibition against marrying multiple wives “angered the *yud*” in the word *ירבה*, as the story continues:

אמרו רבותינו באותה שעה עלתה יו"ד שבירבה ונשתטחה לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא ואמרה רבון העולמים לא כך אמרת אין אות בטלה מן התורה לעולם, הרי שלמה עומד ומבטל אותי ושמא היום יבטל אחת ולמהר אחרת עד שתבטל כל התורה

² It is worth noting that there are several versions of this story about what Shlomo ha-Melekh got wrong and why, including a prominent one at *Yerushalmi Sanhedrin* 2:6. See also *bShab* 56b. The goal of this paper is to present a close reading of the midrash at hand, rather than to compare the versions of this teaching.

כולה, אמר לה הקדוש ברוך הוא שלמה ואלף כיוצא בו יהיו בטלין וקוצה ממך
איני מבטל.

The interplay in this passage features the relationship between the spirit and the letter of the law, in both of the latter's senses. First, Shlomo's rejection of the letter of the law in light of its spirit, his presuming to reject a consequentialist law given his self-assessed imperviousness to those consequences. But second of all, the *literal* letter of the law, the *yud*, is the one so offended that it goes knocking on Heaven's door with claims against King Shlomo. By presuming that the law did not apply to him, he was not only ignoring a law, but was effectively *erasing* that law from the Torah. Thus, Shlomo's offense was not only against the letter of the law as practiced, but also the *physical* letter of the law as it appears in the Torah. The midrash says that Shlomo attempted to outsmart God's *gezerah*, His decree. A *gezerah* is absolute as it represents a categorical, inflexible form of law; furthermore, it can also refer to a literal *gezerah*, something that is cut and chiseled—a letter! The fixedness of this teaching is reflected not only in the nature of the law but in the nature of the writing as well, the physical manifestation of the law etched into parchment (if not stone).

It is worth noting here the prevalence of the “slippery slope” argument, in different forms, as the Midrash extends the scope of this worry as well, as the *gezerah* is meant to forestall unexpected and unseemly consequences. The Torah expresses a concern that if the king has too many wives it will lead his heart astray, even if he is unconcerned. The Midrash commenting on this story raises the fear that erasing one letter of the Torah will lead to erasing the whole Torah, even if Shlomo is not worried in this vein. Following the rule, even if does not seem applicable, avoids these problems.

Why, of all letters, is it the *yud* that complains before God?³ Some commentaries point out that, when added to the root ה.ב.ה, and accompanied by a negation, the *yud* provides imperative prohibitive force to the verb. Additionally, we could argue that, in subverting the Biblical command of לא ירבה with his own assertion that אני ארבה, Shlomo effectively erases the *yud*, replacing it with an *alef*. While this is true, the *yud* also symbolizes something else. As God says, a great king like Shlomo and a thousand more like him (note the resonance with האלף לך שלמה at *Shir ha-Shirim* 8:12) can be undone before God is willing to undo a *kotza*, a jot, a

³ There is a wonderful pun here, as the letter *yud* asks God why, if God committed not to erase letters, “you are erasing me.” The word “me,” אותי, could literally be translated as “my letter,” or “my *ot*,” a double entendre facilitated by granting speech to letters.

yud, from His Torah. It is precisely the fact that the *yud* is the smallest and most minor letter that makes the message of God's unwillingness to modify any letter of the law all the more powerful. Although kings may seem formidable in this world, representing actual power, and a minor *yud* and the mere, slippery slope argument it represents, seems much weaker, at best representing potentiality, God makes it clear that this is an incorrect assessment of reality. The Divine unbreakable word can never be undone, and the smallest letter from God outweighs the greatest human monarch. The letter of the law, both in the pure Halakhic rules without recourse to *ta'ama di-kra* and in the sense of *ot ahat min ha-Torah*, will never be abrogated.

And thus, mighty Shlomo, for rejecting but a *yud*, faces the full force of the God's wrath.

ומנין שבטל אותה מן התורה וחזר לתורה שנאמר (בראשית יז) שרי אשתך לא תקרא שמה שרי כי שרה שמה, והיכן חזר (במדבר יג) ויקרא משה להושע בן נון יהושע.

We have proof that letters of the Torah, even the minor *yud*, cannot be erased. Even where a *yud* seems to disappear, such as with the shift from Sarai to Sarah, it simply reappears later in Yehoshua's reinforced name. And just to make the message clearer, the shift from Hoshea to Yehoshua introduces a theonym as Hoshea expands into *Ya-h yoshi'akha*, the Lord will save you, the erased *yud* preserved through Yehoshua. The Torah's *yud* will always be protected. But what about Shlomo?

ושלמה שהרהר לבטל אות מן התורה, מה כתיב בו (משלי ל) דברי אגור בן יקא, שאיגר דברי תורה והקיאן, נאם הגבר לאיתיאל, דבר זה שאמר הקדוש ברוך הוא לא ירבה לו נשים לא אמר לו אלא בשביל לא יסור לבבו, לאיתיאל שאמר אתי אל ואוכל, מה כתיב ביה (מ"א = מלכים א' = יא) ויהי לעת זקנת שלמה נשיו הטו את לבבו, אמר רשב"י נוח לו לשלמה שיהא גורף ביבין שלא נכתב עליו המקרא הזה.

For his thought to delete a letter from the Torah, Shlomo is not only expelled from his position (see *Gittin* 68) but is also insulted in his very own *Mishlei* 30:1. He is referred to as Agur ben Yakeh, understood as one who gathers words of Torah, only to spit them out. This describes Shlomo's failure to properly internalize the Divine command, and his preference to interpret it according to his own whims instead, and thus spitting out not just a *yud* but the law's application to his life as well. This was done with the false confidence of the one who hears the Divine word (where God is the "גבר" of the prohibition and presumptuously responds "איתי אל ואוכל", "God is with me and I will succeed," as that verse ends.

Damningly, Shlomo's greatest embarrassment, worse than being en-grossed in the sewage cleaning business (where he might have come across the words of Torah he spat up), is the revelation that, in the end, his many wives did sway his heart away from God, giving the lie to the very confidence he placed in himself.

The rejection of Shlomo's path is thus double. First, he is incorrect for rejecting the Divine word, reasoning that it is inapplicable to him. Rejecting the letter of the Divine law is wrong in itself. Here, however, the midrash reveals another aspect to Shlomo's error. His very logic as to why the law should not apply in his case was disproven. Shlomo's insistence that he would never be led astray—used to “permit” his overly polygynous ways—was itself what did lead him astray in the end.

In fact, the midrash's formulation of Shlomo's original claim—אני ולא ירבה—*Devarim's* prohibition—ארבה ולבי לא יסור ונשיו הטו את לבבו—and Shlomo's ultimate failure—לו נשים ולא יסור לבבו. This formulation draws out what the verses already indicate, namely Shlomo's inability to appreciate that the “slippery slope” argument applies to the supremely wise Shlomo as much as to anyone else, and maybe even most of all. Far from being the exception to the rule, Shlomo becomes the very cautionary tale against kings having too many wives.

The verse in *Mishlei* 30 is invoked not only because of the brilliant wordplay regarding one who takes in Torah but spits some of it out, who hears the charge of the Divine גבר and presumes he can ignore it and succeed. The context in that chapter is also deeply connected to the very topic that the midrash is explicating.

The continuation features a sharp, flagellatory self-critique (*Mishlei* 30:2–3):

כי בער אנכי מאיש ולא־בינת אדם לי
ולא־למדתי חכמה ודעת קדשים אדע

The speaker (Shlomo, as the midrash tells us) calls himself a brute rather than a man, lacking basic human wisdom (בינה). He failed to learn wisdom (חכמה), lacking the knowledge (דעת) of the holy ones.

With the invocation of this passage about how Shlomo (in *Mishlei*, as Agur ben Yakeh-Itiel) fails to achieve חכמה ודעת, wisdom and knowledge, the midrash can return to its opening verse,⁴ Shlomo's depiction (in his

⁴ This midrash appears to be conflating two different verses in *Kobelet*. While the citation at the beginning of the piece was that of והוללות חכמה ודעת וסכלות, i.e., Eccl. 2:12, the citation here incorporates the word דעת, following Eccl. 1:17 (ואתנה לבי לדעת חכמה ודעת הוללות ושכלות), while retaining the opening

Kohelet persona) of his failed attempt to achieve חכמה ודעת, wisdom and knowledge:

ולכך אמר שלמה על עצמו (קהלת ב) ופניתי אני לראות חכמה ודעת הוללות וסכלות, אמר שלמה מה שהייתי מחכים על דברי תורה והייתי מראה לעצמי שאני יודע דעת התורה ואותו הבינה ואותו הדעת של הוללות וסכלות היו.

Shlomo ha-Melekh's incorrect interpretation of the prohibition against monarchic polygyny is the failed attempt at wisdom and knowledge hinted at in this verse. The midrash here resolves the tension between the positive חכמה and דעת, on the one hand, and the negative הוללות וסכלות on the other. In fact, this was not true wisdom (חכמה) but rather an attempt to outsmart the Torah (מחכים על דברי תורה); this was not true knowledge (דעת) but a false self-impression of knowledge (הייתי מראה) (לעצמי שאני יודע). In truth, this "knowledge" was nothing more than a knowledge of madness and folly (אותו הדעת של הוללות וסכלות היו). This tension fits our case perfectly, as Shlomo adopted madness and folly, which presented itself under the guise of wisdom and knowledge.

What was the cause of his error? As noted above, Shlomo failed in multiple ways when he rejected this law by presuming its inapplicability to his situation. First, generally speaking, one must follow the letter of the law and not invoke the טעמא דקרא,⁵ the reason or spirit of the law, in rejecting it. Second, one cannot reject the textual letter of God's law, the *yud*, and doing so has dire consequences. Third, the entire attempt was based on overconfidence and a failure by Shlomo to estimate his own character, as is demonstrated by his ultimate downfall.

The midrash adds another cause of Shlomo's error, one that is hiding in plain sight, in *Mishlei* 2:12:

למה כי מה האדם שיבא אחרי המלך את אשר כבר עשוהו, מי הוא שיהיה רשאי להרהר אחר מדותיו וגזרותיו של ממ"ה הקדוש ברוך הוא דברים אשר הם חצובים מלפניו, שכל דבר ודבר שיוצא מלפניו טרם הוא נמלך בפמליא של מעלה ומודיע להם הדבר כדי שידעו ויעידו כולן כי דינו דין אמת וגזירותיו אמת וכל דבריו בהשכל, וכה"א (משלי ל) כל אמרת אלוה צרופה ואומר (דניאל ד) בגזירת עירין פתגמא שלפי שהרהרתי אחר מעשיו נכשלתי.

of 2:12. The inclusion of דעת (from 1:17) renders the connection to Proverbs 30 and its חכמה ודעת stronger, while the continuation of 2:12 features the very important reference to the impossibility of second-guessing the King, as we will see below: כִּי מִה הָאֱלֹהִים שֶׁיִּבְּוֹא אַחֲרַי הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת אֲשֶׁר-כָּבַר עֲשׂוּהוּ. The conflation of the two verses may thus best serve the midrash's goals.

⁵ See bBM 115a and bSan 21a.

The midrash focuses, in explicating Shlomo's confessed failure in *Kohelet*, on his improper questioning of the (Divine) King's decree. "Who can question the attributes and decrees of the King of Kings, the Holy One blessed be He, words that are chiseled before Him?"

This passage features the repeated theme of the Divine word as an implement that literally shapes the physical word. God's expressions are referred to multiple times as *gezeirot*, meaning decrees but carrying the further implication of something that is physically cut (ג.ז.ר) into the fabric of reality. God's words are referred to as *חצובים מלפניו*, "chiseled before Him," the words ingraining themselves in the physical world.

God's words are not only given expression in a physical dimension but are also defined by their aspect of truth. The midrash offers to the *Divine retinue*, as it were, the role of affirming that every Divine utterance is true and wise (גזירותיו אמת וכל דבריו בהשכל). But the truth value of these statements is determined *before* they are heard by this Divine retinue, *טרם הוא נמלך*. God, of course, does not need advisors to weigh His opinions; these angelic beings are meant primarily to affirm the transcendent truth of the Divine utterances.

Thus, two verses are invoked, one of which returns us to that same chapter of *Mishlei* (*perek* 30):

(ה) כִּלְאֵמֶרֶת אֱלוֹהִים צְרוּפָה מִגֵּן הוּא לְחֹסִים בּוֹ:
(ו) אֶל־תּוֹסֵף עַל־דְּבָרָיו פְּנִי־יֹכִים בָּהֶן וְנִכְבְּדָתָ:

Not only is verse 5, which is cited by this midrash and asserts the truth and perfection (צרופה) of God's statements, relevant, but so is the continuation. God's words are not only perfect but also protective of those who follow them, *מגן הוא לחוסים בו*. By contrast, those who attempt to diverge from God's word, specifically those who *add to* God's word, building in exceptions and the like, will find themselves rebuked and dismayed. This is a perfect description of Shlomo's attempt to add to the law, which results in his personal destruction.

The other verse cited is also significant, drawing as it does from one of Daniel's speeches to Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 4:14):

(יד) בְּגִזְרַת עִירִין פִּתְגָמָא וּמֵאִמֵּר קִדְיִשִׁין שְׁאַלְתָּא עַד־דְּבַרְתָּ דִּי יִנְדְעוּן חֵיָא דִּי־
שְׁלִיט עֲלֵיא עֲלָאָה בְּמַלְכוּת אַנוּשָׂא אַנְשָׂא וּלְמוֹדֵי יִצְבָּא יִתְנַנְּה וּשְׁפַל אַנְשִׁים יִקִּים
עֲלֵיהָ עֲלָה:

This verse features several of the points made in the midrash. It highlights the prospect of language affecting the world—the clause *בגזרת עירין* features no fewer than four terms referring to speech, while also affirming that they determine what happens in the

world, drawing upon the synonymy in Aramaic (as in Hebrew) between utterances and things (פתגמא). The goal here is also knowledge, but a particular type of knowledge, with the goal being that all creatures know (די עיריין) and recognize God's authority. Furthermore, while the decisive decree is made by God, the ruling is expressed by several angels (קדישין), as it were, before being delivered unto the world. This depiction of an affirming Divine retinue is followed by our midrash. But most of all, the theme of God transferring power from the strong to the weak is central. Consider the midrash's earlier distinction between the powerful King Shlomo and the tiny letter *yud*; this verse reinforces the statement of God's ability to control the world and its power structures simply with His word.

Having concluded the account of Shlomo and his failed attempt to outsmart the Divine word, the midrash now turns to that parallel and more *parashah*-appropriate case of Moshe and his attempt to avoid the Divine word.

כיצד נאמר על משה לפי שכבר הודיע הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה שלא יניח אותם פרעה לילך, שנאמר ואני ידעתי כי לא יתן אתכם מלך מצרים להלוך ואני אחזק את לבו, ומשה לא שמר את הדבר הזה אלא בא להתחכם על גזירתו של הקדוש ברוך הוא והתחיל אומר ה' למה הרעות לעם הזה התחיל לדון לפניו (כמו שכתוב למעלה).

Moshe had been warned from the beginning of his mission that he would face rejection at the early stages of his interactions with Pharaoh. Rather than wisely heeding this Divine caution, Moshe seeks to outsmart God's decree that he go to Pharaoh, instead critiquing God's path as one that worsens Israel's situation.

וע"ז נאמר שאותה חכמה ודעת של משה של הוללות וסכלות היו, כי מה האדם שיבא אחרי המלך, וכי מה היה לו להרהר אחר מדותיו של הקדוש ברוך הוא את אשר כבר עשוהו, מה שכבר גילה לו שהוא עתיד לחזק את לבו בעבור לעשות לו דין תחת אשר העבדים בעבודה קשה.

Here the midrash invokes that same verse in *Kohélet* asserting that a plan Moshe thought to be wise and knowledgeable turned out to be mad and silly. On this reading, Moshe's folly is twofold: not only is he trying to second-guess the King, but he does so after God already informed him of the plan to harden Pharaoh's heart! Despite the lack of new information, Moshe dares to question God, a move that is called silly. In this reading, as opposed to the one regarding Shlomo, *אשר כבר עשוהו* denotes not just the general concept of Divine command, but specifically

the fact that God foresaw and foretold the situation that Moshe is only now inappropriately responding to.

ועל דבר זה בקשה מדת הדין לפגוע במשה, ה"ד וידבר אלהים אל משה, ולפי שנסתכל הקדוש ב"ה שבשביל צער ישראל דבר כן חזר ונהג עמו במדת רחמים, ה"ד ויאמר אליו אני ה'.

Based on Moshe's error God wished to injure and punish him, as the *middat ba-din* is invoked at the beginning of *V'a'era*, but God instead treated Moshe with mercy, and this explains the shift in both Divine names and speech verbs at the beginning of the *parashah* (*Shemot* 6:2), from the harsher *א.מ.ר* and *Elokim* to the more merciful *א.מ.ר* and *Shem Havayah*.

It is clear that this midrash is masterfully built, with insightful invocations of verses to support its broader point. God runs the world, with a plan; God's decrees affect the very physical world and should not be questioned; God has the capacity to invert power hierarchies; the letter of the law must be preserved. What broader implications might this midrash hold, beyond those touching on the specific story at hand?

I would suggest that this midrash is making a specific point about the unchanging nature of Halakhah, polemicizing against those who would reject it. Shlomo's conceit was that the law's letter could be rejected in light of its spirit, with the proper understanding of the law's purpose permitting the erasure of its letter. Further, he thought he could understand his personal proclivities better than the undifferentiated law might have. This approach entails a rejection of both law as binding rather than suggestion and a rejection of the physical instantiation of the law, namely the law's body, the physical letter of the law, i.e., the *yud*. God's response to Shlomo is not just that God possesses superior wisdom, but also, possibly more importantly, that God has full control over the physical world. Erasing but a *yud* can trigger the downfall of a pluripotent monarch. God wishes the law to be followed as He set it out, and so it must be. There are multiple references here to God as Creator of the world, the King Who created and set everything into motion from the beginning. The law is not just some tepid suggestion; it is chiseled in stone, integrated into the fabric of the universe that God established. As Shlomo learns all too painfully, the letter of God's law is built into the world's very nature and it cannot be avoided.

One might more fully appreciate the significance of these powerful claims about the unchanging nature of the law as God's plan for the world

in light of some philosophical movements that rabbinic Jews were confronted with. The claims of this *midrash* serve as strong responses to Platonism, a belief system stemming from the Athenian philosopher Plato that was influential in different iterations around the first few centuries CE, built upon by both Philo and Paul, and which influenced early Christianity (through Middle and Neo-Platonism) well into the Medieval period.

Although *Shemot Rabbah* is understood by scholars to have a fairly late date of final compilation, around the 11th or 12th centuries, there are several reasons why we might still look back to the first few centuries CE for helpful context. First of all, *Shemot Rabbah*'s final form may contain earlier materials responding to critiques from the Tannaitic and Amoraic periods. Even if the material in this *midrash* is itself of late provenance, it may very well still be responding to later incarnations of the concept that were raised (puns intended) by medieval Christians.

One of the central views of Middle Platonism was that words are not significant in themselves but serve only as repositories for the deeper, spiritual meanings that they contain. As Daniel Boyarin puts it:

Language itself is understood as an outer, physical shell, and meaning is construed as the invisible, ideal, and spiritual reality that lies behind or is trapped within the body of the language.⁶

As Philo describes the views of the Therapeutae, a Greek philosophical sect adhering to Middle Platonism, the law is like a living organism, its words the body and its deeper, allegorical meaning the soul.⁷ This is taken a step further by Paul in his critique of (Pharisaic) Judaism as incorrectly following the letter of the law rather than its spirit. Paul rejects the literal, and therefore physical, interpretation of laws such as sacrifice (I Cor 10) and circumcision (Gal 5).⁸

The now widespread English phrases “letter of the law” and “spirit of the law” originate with Paul, mediated through the King James translation.⁹ Of course, Paul was not just presenting this lucid dichotomy for

⁶ Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 15.

⁷ See *De Vita Contemplativa*, II.78.

⁸ For an extensive treatment of Paul's conceptual project, see Boyarin, *A Radical Jew*, at length.

⁹ For this reason, I often chuckle when I see these terms quoted by contemporary rabbis who would never knowingly quote the New Testament and who invoke this dichotomy as they argue that Judaism is *really* about the spirit of the law rather than its letter or that only *poskim* can appreciate the spirit of the law that

the purposes of intellectual exploration; he was participating in a polemic that delegitimized the traditional Jewish perspective of law. The stereotype of the Pharisee as the small-minded, legalistic hypocrite who fails to see the larger picture emerges directly from Paul and had major, negative implications for Jewish life (and Jewish lives) for centuries afterward. Paul's line that it is necessary to embrace a new covenant (also known as a new testament), because "the letter kills but the spirit gives life" (II Cor 3:6) led to a supersessionist movement with noxious implications for Jews and Judaism. This was animated not just by a rejection of legalistic formalism, but also by a claim about the very nature of law. Law in this view is not fundamentally comprised of the legislated material, but of the concepts behind it. This was animated by a metaphysical perspective on reality—the "real" world is not the physical world but the spiritual world. On this basis, building upon Middle Platonism and applying it to the law and its presumed limitations, generations of Christians attacked Judaism and the legalism it stood for.

Enter our midrash.

The midrashic passage studied in this article responds to each of these claims. It starts by asserting that the physical world that God created is of great value. Rather than see the existence of the physical world itself as insufficient or flawed in some sense (as many thinkers of the first few centuries CE did, to one degree or another¹⁰), *Ḥazal* emphasize that the Creator of the physical world is the one and true God. Not only that, but the world's existence itself had Torah law baked into it. The law is not some general or loose rule of thumb to be consulted or adopted voluntarily, but is chiseled and cut, and thus exceptionless. Not only is the law an essential part of the physical world, but the physical instantiations of the Law are essential, as well. If even one of the Torah's physical letters is out of place, God will invoke righteous indignation on its behalf, carry out justice, and impose punishment in this physical world.

The context utilized by the midrash further supports this idea that it is a polemic against Greek philosophy in a Christian guise. Consider the text around which this Midrash is constructed, namely *Kohélet*. Of course,

lies behind and animates its letter. The term *lifnim mi-shurat ha-din*, literally "within the line of the law," is all too often mistranslated as "beyond the letter of the law," again unwittingly invoking Pauline stereotypes.

¹⁰ The most extreme of these were the Gnostics, who believed that the physical world was inferior to the spiritual world, and human bodies inferior to souls. This could only be the case because (in their dualistic system) an inferior god created the physical world, one who could not measure up to the true god who created the spiritual world.

this is the most philosophical of all Biblical books, with its author questioning the meaning of life at every turn. Another text cited here, *Mishlei*, is also deeply philosophical in nature. It is no coincidence that both are attributed to Shlomo ha-Melekh's authorship, as he was known to be the wisest of all people. The moral of this story is that too much philosophy can lead one astray, as it did Shlomo. Sometimes, argues the *midrash*, what is necessary is not more philosophy but instead an absolute, unthinking commitment to God and God's law, to direct our conduct in this physical world. To that end, the midrash parodies Agur ben Yakeh, who plays the role of philosopher. He hopes to take in words of Torah and spit them out at will, presuming that God supports this endeavor. The attempt, however, to spit out Torah and reject the physical aspect of the law while asserting Divine support on account of following the spirit of the law, is a recipe for disaster. As Shlomo says, reflecting back upon his own experiences, what he thought would be wise and knowledgeable, revealed itself to be folly instead.

This midrash thus pits Middle Platonism, camouflaged as (disastrous) Solomonic wisdom, against the concept of the letter of the law, in both of its senses. Can we question the Torah's punctiliousness? Dare we reject its hold on our physical world? The midrash comes down very squarely against Shlomo ha-Melekh, building on his own expressed regrets at the end of his life. There is no second-guessing the primordial God, Who created the world, engrained the law within it, and encoded that law using the unchanging letter of the law. Questioning such a God can be nothing other than folly. ❧