The Sticks and Stones of Athens and Jerusalem: Re-Examining the Evolution of the Jeremiah-Plato Encounter in Its Modern Context

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I. Introduction

In his famous lecture series subsequently published as *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, Yosef Ḥayyim Yerushalmi discusses the role of history in Jewish tradition, scholarship, and life. At first glance, it would seem that Jews are the quintessential historians. The Bible enjoins Jews to remember the past: "Remember the days of old; reflect upon the years of [other] generations. Ask your father, and he will tell you; your elders, and they will inform you" (Deuteronomy 32:7). Historical events are eternally memorialized in liturgy, rituals, and scholarship. Yerushalmi argues, however, that there is a distinction between history and memory.

History is concerned with facts—complete and without bias. Memory has a different focus; it is selective, preserving and highlighting the parts of and perspectives on the past that are important for perpetuating heritage. The latter, Yerushalmi argues, is what Judaism values. "The biblical appeal to remember [history] has little do with curiosity about the past. Israel is told only that it must be a kingdom of priests and a holy people; nowhere is it suggested it become a nation of historians."[1] For Judaism, the past is important only inasmuch as it can be operationalized to facili-

[1] Yerushalmi 10.

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tate the values required to cultivate "a kingdom of priests and a holy people." Thus, Yerushalmi concludes, "If Herodotus was the father of history, the fathers of meaning of history were the Jews."[2]

One of the many implications of this distinction is how history is retold for the purposes of Jewish memory. Historical accounts are modified over the course of time; bias, scholarship, human error, innovative thinking, breakthrough discoveries, and the ravages of human civilization on written record and cultural memory all ensure the inevitability of development. But beyond pure addition, deletion, and modification, there is another process that historical narratives are subjected to: a shift in emphasis. Facts can be undeniable and eternal, but that does not guarantee a story's immutability in national memory. As a people evolves, so do the challenges they face, the values that must be reinforced, and the lessons of history that must be remembered. Thus, the focus of a story can shift over generations and, as a result, certain nuances can be contoured to suit that evolving need.[3] Indeed, Lowenthal describes heritage as "a profession of faith in a past tailored to present-day purposes."[4]

Such a description does not inherently impugn the credibility or veracity of such memories. It does, however, enable and behoove both the studier of history and the seeker of meaning of history to better understand the development of issues in a particular generation or group that prompted the narrative's concurrent evolution. One such example is the evolution of an account describing a meeting between the prophet Jeremiah and Plato. Initial records of the story can be traced back to antiquity with various iterations throughout the Medieval, Early Modern, Modern, and Post-Modern eras. The basic story remained quite similar in each historical period, with a few modifications as it was adapted by various scholars and authors. During the 19th and 20th Centuries, however, the narrative underwent significant evolution with numerous additions and a very stark change in which details and lessons were stressed in the retelling.

The goal of this paper is not to assess the historical accuracy of the account itself,[5] but to study the evolution of the story, particularly during

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2 Yerushalmi, 8. In fn. 4 Yerushalmi clarifies that by "meaning of history," he is referring to transcendent meaning. Yerushalmi agreed that even Herodotus believed there to be a purpose for preserving history. Such purpose, however, was merely to create "a bulwark against the inexorable erosion of memory engendered by the passage of time."

3 For a detailed analysis on how this affects Jewish literature and tradition, see Schachter and Shapiro.

4 Lowenthal, X.

5 This task has already been undertaken for millennia by many scholars such as Augustine in *De Civitate Dei*. See Melamed 87–88.

the last 200 years by comparing the various accounts within the historical and cultural context of their respective iterations. Such analysis highlights a dramatic shift in the usage of the story in the last two centuries. Until the modern era, the story had been a response to the allure of Western philosophy by demonstrating the Jewish origins of Greek thought. Such a strategy, however, proved insufficient to stem the tide of secularization and increased integration into secular society during the *Haskalah* period. During this era, the emphasis of the story as told by leaders of the *Mussar* movement shifted away from intellectual supremacy to a spiritual, ethical one. The focus further shifted in contemporary times to reflect new challenges and threats faced by the Orthodox communities in Israel and the United States concerning a lack of spiritual fulfillment and connection to God in daily life.

II. Meetings between Athens and Jerusalem

The historical and literary roots of this interaction can be traced back to the Hellenistic Period and are part of a broader trend of scholars stretching back to Herodotus who sought to demonstrate a connection between Greek philosophy and cultures of the East. Interestingly, the earliest records of such claims are not found in Jewish sources, but in Greek ones like the works of historian Hecataeus of Abdera, botanist Theophrastus, and diplomat Megasthenes in the 4th Century BCE. The earliest record in Jewish sources can be found in the writings of Jewish Egyptian philosopher Aristoblus approximately 200 years later.[6] While there has been much debate whether or not the hypothesis of the Jewish origins of Greek philosophy began with oral Jewish accounts before Hecataeus, the theory quickly gained traction amongst Jewish Hellenistic philosophers and writers such as Philo and later Josephus. Most of these references are general ones, claiming that Greek scholars were influenced by the words and writings of Jewish scholars, though certain historical figures like Plato were mentioned.[7]

The majority of these works did not survive to the present time in their original form, but were ultimately preserved by early Christian writers. For the Fathers of the Church, the Jewish influence on Greek philosophy was critical to underscore that the teachings of Socrates, Plato, and

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6 Melamed 2010 3–9, 20–24; Melamed 2012 41.

7 See Gager 26–37, 78–79, 88–89; Gaeger; Gutman 74–88, 119, 129–131; Melamed 2010 3–6, 55–62; Meiselman 17–26 and fn. 40, 35–49; Satal (2005 vol. 26) 194–197; Satal (2005 vol. 28 187–200); Tcherikover 169, 180–193.

Aristotle were "nothing but footnotes to the Hebrew Bible."[8] Similarly, Medieval and Early Modern Jewish scholars and philosophers sought to demonstrate the Jewish roots for Western philosophy so that Jews enamored by contemporary and ancient philosophers should "not give our praise and glory to the gentile sages."[9] To that end, Christian and Jewish scholars propagated the classical accounts, enriching them with their own research and theories. Some asserted that ultimately Plato was so convinced by the authenticity and brilliance of the Semitic sages that he circumcised himself and converted to Judaism. Others asserted that Socrates followed Nebuchadnezzar into Jerusalem and used materials from King Solomon's library to create his system of philosophy.[10]

One of the claims that elicited much discussion was that Plato had studied the wisdom of scholars in Egypt. Popularized by Augustine, Ambrose of Milan theorized that Plato met Jeremiah or at the very least read some of his works. Augustine himself initially accepted the hypothesis, but ultimately rejected it due to his historical calculations.[11] Despite this subsequent repudiation, the idea persisted, gaining traction in Jewish and even some Islamic works.[12] There was, however, very little substantive development of the initial narrative until the 19th and 20th Centuries.

III. The Contemporary Account

One of the most recent iterations of the story can be found in Rabbi Shimshon Dovid Pincus's *Galut U-Neḥamah*. Published posthumously in 2002, the essays in *Galut U-Neḥamah* are edited transcripts of recorded lectures Pincus delivered on Tishah B'Av eve in the seminary he led in Israel. In two of these lectures, Pincus relates the famous story, sourcing it to *Torat Ha-Olah* written by 16th-Century Polish scholar Rabbi Moshe Isserles:

> In the book *Torat HaOlah* of the Rama, it is recorded that when the prophet Jeremiah saw the destruction of the Temple, he fell on the sticks and stones and wept. Plato—one of the Greek philosophers—met him and asked: "You are the wisest of Jews, [and yet] you weep over sticks and stones?!" He further asked, why do you cry over the past? Focus on building the future! Jeremiah said to him: "You are a great philosopher; you must have questions in philosophy." Plato told him: "I have questions but I do not think there is anyone who

8 Melamed 2012 44.
9 Isserles 1:11.
10 Isserles 1:11; Melamed 2012 44; Satal (2002 vol. 26) 197–198.
11 Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana* 2:28:43; *The City of God* 8:11.
12 Melamed 2010 133–138; Melamed 2012 49.

> knows how to answer them." Jeremiah said to him, "Ask them and I will answer them." Plato asked—and Jeremiah answered all his difficulties, until the philosopher wondered whether the one standing before him was a man or an angel full of wonderful wisdom. Jeremiah said to him: "Know that all my wisdom is from those sticks and stones!—and what you asked why I weep over the past, I will not answer you, because this thing is very deep and you will not be able to understand it—only a Jew can understand the profound meaning of weeping over the past."[13]

In this version, Plato meets Jeremiah at the site of the destroyed Temple and asks the prophet two questions: 1) Why the "wisest of the Jews" would weep over sticks and stones, and 2) What the utility was of crying over the past instead of focusing on building the future. Jeremiah answers the first question by resolving all of the philosopher's difficulties and explaining that the destroyed building was the source of this superhuman wisdom, and explains that he is unable to successfully explain the utility in crying over the past to a gentile.

Despite Pincus's assertions, there is no mention of any such account in *Torat Ha-Olah*.[14] The only passage remotely related is when Isserles declares (1:11) that the wisdom of secular philosophers came from the Jewish nation. He references an unnamed "old book" which outlined the history of philosophy and recorded how Socrates received his knowledge from the biblical Asaf HaKarḥi and Aḥitofel. Additionally, Isserles quotes the 14th-Century philosophical work *Shvilei Emunah* by Meir Aldabi which maintains that Aristotle gained much of his knowledge from accessing the writings of King Solomon in Jerusalem after Alexander the Great conquered Jerusalem. Isserles does not devote time and energy to compare the accuracy of these varying accounts, rather restating his ultimate goal that "Regardless [of the account], it is clear that all the wisdom of the world emanates from this line [of philosophers ultimately originating with the Jews] and indeed it is fitting that every Jew should believe this and not give our praise and glory to the gentile sages."

While these stories do describe interactions between philosophers and prophets, they are in no way similar to the passage outlined in Pincus's

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13 Pincus 2002 53, 117–118. A subsequent English translation by Shmuel Globus of Pincus's Hebrew work was published in 2015. This was not, however, a literal translation. To maintain greater fidelity to the Hebrew text, an original translation was utilized.

14 This observation has been made by many scholars. For example, see Melamed; Satal (2002 vol. 27) 214; Satal (2002 vol. 28) 192 fn. 160.

discourse. Indeed, the editor of the posthumous work (Posen[15]) appeared to be cognizant of this fact and provided a potential source for Pincus's attribution. They suggest that Pincus was referencing a discourse made several decades earlier by the 20th-Century Ḥaredi (Ultra-Orthodox) Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian. Like *Galut U-Neḥamah*, *Lev Eliyahu* is a posthumous work of a collection of writings and discourses given by Lopian over his decades-long career in England and Israel as an educator, counselor, and seminary administrator. Lopian's version of the story is identical to Pincus's account and also explicitly identifies *Torat Ha-Olah* as the source.[16]

At the conclusion of the story, Lopian noted that his teacher Rabbi Simchah Zissel Ziv—known as the Alter of Kelm—used to remark how the answer to Plato's second question was quite simple. Jeremiah was not crying about the past, rather about the future. Ziv quoted the Talmudic teaching (*Bava Metzia* 59a) that the only gate of prayer that remained open after the Temple's destruction is the gates of tears. Thus, it is through such tears that the Temple will be rebuilt. Ziv used this answer to underscore how one can appreciate the great sanctity of a Jewish soul from this story. For something that is so obvious that even the simplest of Jews can understand, the greatest of the sages of the nations of the world could not comprehend.

Pincus also records Ziv's analysis of the story and would thus support the editors' assertion that Pincus's source for the story was Lopian's work. While Lopian's work may account for Pincus's misattribution of the account to the *Torat Ha-Olah*, it does not actually explain the rationale for Lopian's reference to Isserles's work. Indeed, Lopian's language is ambiguous, and it is not clear whether it was he or his teacher Ziv who made the citation.

IV. Tracing the Origin

Lopian and Ziv were not the first individuals to attribute such a story to the *Torat Ha-Olah*. One of the earliest sources that cites[17] the *Torat Ha-Olah* is 16th-Century Italian Gedaliah ibn Yiḥya in his work *Shalshelet Ha-Kabbalah*:

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15 Posen served as executive editor and credits Rabbis Tzvi Yosef Schechter and Shlomo Hoffman as the transcribers of the recording.

16 Lopian vol. 1 270–271.

17 Melamed 2010 323, Melamed 2012 50; Satal (2002 vol. 27) 214; Satal (2002 vol. 28) 192 fn. 160.

> I received a tradition from my great teacher of blessed memory that he saw in Rabbi Netanel ibn Kaspi's commentary to the *Kuzari* that Plato said: "I was with Jeremiah in Egypt, and initially I was mocking him and his words, and in the end, once I became accustomed to speaking with and to watching his actions carefully, I saw that his words were words of the Living God. Then, I said in my heart, and I established, that he was a sage and prophet." And so wrote the author of *Torat Ha-Olah* (1:11).[18]

Although Yiḥya erred in his attribution to *Torat Ha-Olah*, a very similar story can be found in Ibn Kaspi's commentary to the *Kuzari* as well as in the commentary of Ibn Kaspi's contemporary Solomon ben David of Luniel. Melamed and Satal trace this version back to David Messer Leon who had quoted a similar account by Averroes and Ibn Falquera (also quoted by Duran in *Magen Avot*) which featured Plato meeting an anonymous sage who Leon theorized was Jeremiah.[19]

While it is possible to argue that Lopian or Ziv may have read Yiḥya's work and decided to quote the *Torat Ha-Olah* as a source for their story, the accounts are quite different. Aside from the difference in location (Egypt in Kaspi's version and Jerusalem in Lopian's), Lopian's version contains a great deal of information not mentioned in Kaspi's version: Jeremiah is not crying, there is no philosophical question session, and there is absolutely no mention from Plato or Jeremiah regarding the futility or utility of crying over the destruction of the Temple.

In recent years, two additional versions of the account from Ziv's intellectual circle have been discovered as potential antecedents to Lopian's story. In 1899, Rabbi Naḥman Gedalyahu Broder, who was a contemporary of Ziv, recounted a story that he had heard in the name of Ziv's mentor, Rabbi Israel Lipkin (Salanter):

> And I heard in the name of the great *tzaddik* and scholar Rabbi Israel Salanter, *zt"l*, the story relayed from the ancient Roman collected works that at the time of the destruction of the Temple, Jeremiah went into the Diaspora free… and in the middle of the road Plato came… and asked to speak with Jeremiah, though he was praying wrapped in sackcloth with ashes on his head and tears were flowing from his eyes without cessation so he was unable to answer him. After the prayer, Plato received permission from Jeremiah to [ask] any questions that were hidden from him and unresolved… Jeremiah resolved them in a single instant, so much so that Plato was astounded at the profound wisdom that came forth like a spring.

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18 Ibn Yiḥya 237–238.

19 Melamed 2010 133–138; Melamed 2012 49; Satal 2002 (vol. 27) 190–191.

> And Plato asked him, "Since your wisdom is higher and more sublime than any other, why will your soul weep and mourn because of the burning of a stone house [which is] something so bizarre to the wise? And Jeremiah answered unto him, "This wisdom which has rested in me I have inherited from this house which is the source of divine wisdom. And now that the holiness has left, we have no other place to get it." Then Plato agreed with the sorrow and weeping for this holy place.[20]

This version of the story appears to share similarities with both Lopian's account, as well as Yiḥya's. Like Yiḥya's version, Broder's also places Jeremiah in the Diaspora instead of at the site of the destroyed Temple. However, Broder's version diverges in many ways to more closely resemble Lopian's account. Here Jeremiah is crying, Plato questions the utility in mourning the Temple's destruction, Jeremiah answers all of Plato's philosophical problems, and ultimately responds that he is mourning the Temple as the loss of the source of wisdom.

With all its similarities, however, there are several significant differences between the Broder and Lopian accounts. The most glaring is the number of questions that Plato asks Jeremiah. In the Lopian version, Plato asks two distinct questions: 1) the reason for mourning the loss of a building, an inanimate object ostensibly devoid of any actual benefit to a wise intellectual, and 2) the utility of mourning the past. In the Broder version, Plato only appears to ask the first of those questions. Moreover, Jeremiah's answer and Plato's response appear to obviate the need for a second question (as well as Ziv's homiletical answer to the second question); the Broder story concludes with Plato agreeing that it is appropriate to mourn over the loss of such a building.

Another difference lies in the source of the story. Instead of attributing it to the *Torat Ha-Olah* like Lopian, Broder emphasizes that Lipkin knew the story from "ancient Roman works." It is not abundantly clear to what works Lipkin was referring. While many of the initial Hellenistic works are no longer extant, there are several early Christian works that allege a meeting (or cultural interaction) between philosopher and prophet. Additionally, Melamed notes several more recent Early Modern Christian authors who wrote about the meeting. Such availability, however, is not sufficient evidence to conclude that Lipkin actually utilized such works. Indeed, Broder's language of "relayed from the ancient Roman collected works" could simply mean that Lipkin heard about such works or heard about Jewish sources that built upon Christian sources.

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[20] Broder 53.

Moreover, regardless of Lipkin's meaning, no extant earlier work contains the elaborations that the Broder and Lopian contain.

A similar account was also recently published in a memorial book for Lipkin by Dessler (Lipkin's grandson) called *Kadosh Yisrael* containing previously unpublished manuscripts by or about Lipkin. One records a eulogy that Ziv gave for his mentor Lipkin:

> It is found in the books of the nations that Plato saw Jeremiah standing on the Temple Mount moaning like a lion and crying. [Plato] was astounded how a wise person could cry, something relegated to women and children who are moved by animalistic emotions and not logic. A wise person should not mourn over the past, and he should be equanimous. Jeremiah responded that [Plato] was unable to comprehend the reason for his tears. [Plato] did not want to accept such a response until [Jeremiah] responded amidst pain and anguish the answers to the difficult questions [that Plato asked him] whereupon [Plato] said, "It is true that I am unable to understand the reason for your crying."[21]

In this version, the source is attributed to "books of the nations," and the interaction takes place at the site of the destroyed Temple. Additionally, this version only features the second question about the utility of crying over the past. As such, Plato agrees that he cannot understand the reason for crying. While the basic structure and narrative resemble those of Lopian and especially Broder, there are two significant differences: the location and Plato's ultimate response. Because only the second question is featured, Plato acknowledges that he cannot understand the rationale for crying. Ostensibly, this would seem to be a different reaction than the one described in the Broder version.

V. Reconstructing the Development of the Modern Narrative

There are several ways to account for the differences between the three versions attributed to Ziv and Lipkin (Lopian, Broder, and Dessler). Because of the second-hand nature of all the accounts, it is possible that the differences resulted from inevitable transcription errors. However, when considering the earlier Jewish accounts of the story, coupled with the presumable oral transmission of the account—as evidenced by the misattribution to the *Torat Ha-Olah*, as well as Ziv and Lipkins' appeals to secular works containing the narrative instead of Yiḥya's—it is more likely that the different versions complement and build upon one another. Both of Plato's contentions are really sub-points of the broader question regarding

[21] Dessler 121.

the appropriateness of crying over the Temple's destruction. Similarly, Plato's responses, though superficially different in his comprehension or lack thereof, can be reduced to a shared more general response of acknowledgment of Jeremiah and the Temple's supernatural uniqueness. As such, it is possible that all three versions originated from the same source with the same questions.

This broader restatement of the Plato and Jeremiah interaction is essentially a slightly dramatized version of Kaspi's account in which Plato initially expresses derision at Jeremiah and ultimately acknowledges his transcendental quality by observing his deeds and words. When hearing or reading this account, one is immediately faced with the question of why Plato initially mocked Jeremiah. Whatever the reason, it must have been addressed to a certain degree by Jeremiah's "words and deeds." To answer this question, Lipkin suggested that Jeremiah was mourning over the destroyed Temple, and Plato mocked how such a purportedly wise person could mourn a structure of sticks and stones. Jeremiah then responded by illustrating how the Temple was a source of supernatural wisdom, a contention to which Plato ultimately acceded. Such agreement would imply that the Temple was indeed something appropriate to mourn.

In its initial Hellenistic, Christian, and Jewish forms, Plato and Jeremiah's meeting occurred in Alexandria. Such a location would pose a slight challenge to Lipkin's hypothesis that Jeremiah was mourning over the destroyed Temple, as that would be somewhat arbitrary and out of place. Therefore, Lipkin suggested that Jeremiah was not only mourning, but praying for it as well. This may also explain how Lipkin understood the phrase "deeds." The above analysis would best account for the Broder version of the story.

It is unclear whether Ziv heard the story from his mentor Lipkin, so it is impossible to verify whether or not Ziv was exposed to the identical narrative. Because they did operate in the same intellectual circles, though, it is reasonable to assume that they heard similar accounts and or made similar extrapolations. One of the more subtle differences between the Lipkin and Kaspi versions is the terminology used to describe the location of the meeting. Faithful to the ancient accounts, Kaspi records that the two figures met in Egypt. The Broder account uses the much more general description "Jeremiah went into the Diaspora free… and in the middle of the road Plato came…" Whether or not this change was a conscious one, it does allow for an alternative interpretation. It certainly could mean that the meeting occurred in the Diaspora outside the Land of Israel. However, it could also easily be understood—especially if the story was transmitted orally—to mean that Jeremiah was allowed to be free in exile

unlike the rest of his brethren who were forcibly led to Babylon. The implication, then, is that he met Plato at some point on his journey into exile. This interlude could conceivably have occurred while he was still in Jerusalem or even on the road near the Temple Mount. Such a location would certainly better explain why Jeremiah would be mourning and crying over its destruction. As such, Ziv in the Dessler account maintained the location of the meeting was near the Temple and did not mention that Jeremiah was praying, merely crying.

With the above analysis in mind, it is quite likely that Ziv and Lipkin were exposed to the same original source and each attempted to elucidate the circumstances and details of the interaction, including Plato's question and Jeremiah's response. If so, there are several possible ways to explain the second major difference between the two accounts, Plato's question and Jeremiah's reaction:

One possibility, as outlined in Lopian's version, is that both Lipkin and Ziv understood Plato to be implicitly asking Jeremiah both questions and Jeremiah responding to both of them. However, because of the context in which these stories were said or recorded, some of the details of the interaction were truncated for effect and efficiency. Broder's work primarily deals with the Temple serving as the source of all wisdom. Therefore, he only highlighted that aspect of Plato's question, Jeremiah's response, and the description of Plato's acknowledgement that the Temple was indeed worth mourning over. Ziv, however, used the story in his eulogy for Lipkin to demonstrate how one is only able to appropriately mourn a loss when one truly understands its significance. As such, the Dessler account highlights the lack of comprehension when describing Plato's question, Jeremiah's answer (or lack thereof), and Plato's agreement.

A related, but alternative cause for the differences could be that Ziv initially heard Lipkin's version (either from his mentor directly or second hand, as Broder appears to have) and then added his own additional layer to Plato's question and Jeremiah's response (not to the exclusion of Lipkin's analysis) to help explain Plato's initial derision. This also necessitated adding more nuance to Plato's ultimate agreement; he agreed with Jeremiah that the Temple's loss was worthy of mourning, but also acknowledged that he was unable to fully understand it. Indeed, Ziv used the story in his eulogy for Lipkin to demonstrate how one is only able to appropriately mourn a loss when one truly understands its significance. As such, the Dessler account highlights the lack of comprehension when describing Plato's question, Jeremiah's response, and Plato's agreement. Lopian, however, recorded the complete account with both questions from another instance when Ziv relayed the story.

A third possibility is that because many of the sources of the accounts are second hand, it is possible that there were some errors in the details and or attribution of the story. By considering the dates of Broder's life, it is highly unlikely that he ever met Lipkin directly in any significant fashion. Broder was born in Lithuania in 1857 where he lived until he moved to Jerusalem in 1884.[22] Lipkin had relocated to Germany the year Broder was born and lived in Central Europe until his death in 1883, the year that Ziv presumably gave the eulogy described in Dessler.[23] Broder's *Gan Yerushalayim* was not published until 1899, so it is quite possible that Broder heard about Ziv's eulogy and the details may have been inadvertently altered through the transmission and writing process. According to this model, the elaboration of Kaspi's version to explicate the reason for Plato's initial derision began with Ziv instead of Lipkin. Such a hypothesis would be reasonable considering the fact that Ziv was considerably more interested, better versed, and utilized more secular philosophy than Lipkin was known to do.[24]

VI. The Intellectual Source for Lipkin and Ziv's Embellishment

As outlined above, one of the basic premises of all the aforementioned possibilities is that Lipkin and Ziv added the details about Jeremiah and Plato's interaction to elucidate the more general earlier iterations of the narrative that mentioned how Plato initially mocked Jeremiah. The utility of crying may certainly address that issue, but it is not overtly clear as to why they arrived at that specific hypothesis (especially according to the Broder version in which the interaction took place in Alexandria). Because both Lipkin and Ziv had access to and were known to have read works of philosophy including Plato, it stands to reason that they believed that this particular point was something that Plato would bristle at.

One of Plato's works that Jews had been exposed to over the centuries was *Phaedo*. This treatise on death, loss, and the eternity of the soul was well known in the world of Jewish scholarship, presumably because of theme and its parallels in Jewish thought. In the 17th Century, Manasseh

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22 Tidhar.

23 Etkes 250–251.

24 Lipkin's attitude towards secular philosophy is more ambiguous and complex. While some have suggested that he was not in favor of such study, there is evidence that he had access to and read works of philosophy including Kant. The conflicting sentiments may be reflective of Lipkin's evolving attitude over his life. See Etkes 286; Goldberg (1982) 170–176.

ben Israel claimed in *De la Resurreccion de los Muertos* and *Nishmat Ḥayyim* that Plato learnt about the eternity of the soul from Jeremiah.[25] The interest in Plato's work continued its foray into the Central and Eastern European Jewish *zeitgeist* in the 18th Century when Moses Mendelssohn published *Phaedon* in 1767 to combat arguments raised by materialism philosophers in Germany. To that end, Mendelssohn translated and adapted the arguments in *Phaedo* "to the taste of our time,"[26] even adding some arguments of his own.[27] Thus, it is very reasonable to assume that Jews like Ziv who were familiar with Plato's works had at least some exposure to *Phaedo* and Plato's arguments therein.

Set immediately before Socrates's death, *Phaedo* details the final events and conversations between Socrates and his students. As part of Socrates's central argument about the immortality of the soul, he continuously exhorts his disciples and family not to cry or mourn, going so far as to send the women and children out of the room.[28] Similarly, when Plato and others begin to cry at Socrates's impeding death, he berates them for crying like women,[29] not unlike Plato's opening remarks in the Dessler account.

Beyond, the simple repudiation of crying, however, Socrates presents an alternative response to death. Ngay and Loraux note how Socrates chooses not to focus on the "resurrection of the body or preservation of the soul, but simply the idea the living word (*logos*) of philosophical dialogue must stay alive."[30] For Plato and for Plato's Socrates, the word *logos* refers to the living "word" of dialogue in the context of philosophical argumentation. "Philosophy is the highest form of all communication, surpassing even the exalted language that reveals the mysteries of immortality after death."[31] Words have a life of their own. Thus, the proper response for the wise to death is the preserving of the deceased's wisdom and words, thereby granting them immortality. To that end, there was a custom in Plato's academy to celebrate the birthday of Socrates—which by their reckoning coincided with his death day—by engaging in Socratic dialogue, to perpetually resurrect the *logos* of Socrates.

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25 Melamed 379.

26 Mendelssohn 42.

27 Mendelssohn 103–124; Simon 821; see Mijuskovic.

28 For example, see Plato 116b and 117c–e. See also Ngay 647 and Elmer 2010 for how this is manifested in the structure of the narrative itself.

29 Plato 117c–e.

30 Ngay 646; Loraux; Plato 59d–6oa.

31 Ngay 645; Plato 69 c–d.

Conversely, the living word can die and be resurrected. Socrates reacts to his students' sadness by telling them that the only thing that would be worth mourning is not his death but the "death of the conversation he started with them."[32] He advises Echecrates not to cut his hair that day out of grief for his mentor's death. Instead, they should both cut their hair and mourn, "if our argument dies on us, and we cannot revive it… [and take an oath] not to let my hair grow before I fought again [in philosophical debate]."[33]

Such sentiment is quite similar to that expressed by Plato to Jeremiah. Mourning the loss of a person, and all the more so a mere building of sticks and stone that could not be resurrected, was not something a respectable sage should do. Rather, it is wisdom that should be mourned, not merely because it is the most elevated legacy of a person, but because it can be resurrected like the students of Plato did each year on the anniversary of Socrates's birthday (which they believed was also the day of his death). The mourning, such as Echecrates vowing to cut his hair until his arguments can be revived, is not crying over the past, but a forward-looking, constructive force to rebuild the future. Jeremiah's actions are therefore proving that the destroyed Temple was a source of wisdom, and therefore something worth mourning. Moreover, because the wisdom endowed by the Temple was perceived as divine, Plato acknowledged that he was unable to understand it. Likewise, Plato was unable to comprehend how mourning a physical structure could facilitate its resurrection. Thus, it is possible that Ziv and Lipkin used their knowledge of Plato's works to elaborate on what Plato might have found risible and how Jeremiah would have responded.

VII. Using the Prophet-Philosopher Encounter

It is no coincidence that Ziv and Lipkin retold the story with such embellishments. For centuries, the account had been used by Christians and Jews alike to defend the superiority of their beliefs and culture from the perceived external threats of Western Philosophy that could lead to heresy.[34] To that end, their accounts of Jeremiah and Plato's interaction demonstrated how Judaism was the ultimate source of secular wisdom and that Jews, as Isserles declared, "had nothing to be ashamed of." Circumstances began to change during the 18th and 19th Centuries with increased liberalization in Central and Eastern Europe for Jews, presenting

32 Ngay 2015.

33 Plato 89b–c.

34 There are many examples of such debate throughout Medieval and Early-Modern history. Isserles discusses the topic at length in his Responsa (6).

them with greater opportunities for academic, social, and economic advancement. Such advancement often led to increased integration into the broader European society and a proportional detachment from traditional Jewish life and observance. Mere abstract statements of Judaism being the ultimate source of secular wisdom were insufficient to retain those who pulled toward the very real and present intellectual and socioeconomic opportunities. One of the many strategies employed to stem the rapid secularization and assimilation was the *Mussar* movement that Lipkin and his students developed. By stressing character refinement as the pinnacle of human perfection, they sought to increase fear of Heaven and present an alternative to only valuing raw scholarship in place of piety combined with the former.[35]

Ziv, in particular, was known to have studied classical works of philosophy including those of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle to help him in his investigations into the forces of the human psyche and the methods for learning character traits. However, he would prove to himself and others that they were of secondary importance and quality compared to Torah, insisting that a non-Jewish scent came from them. Such books were placed on the lowest shelf of his bookshelf, and he would reflect on them while he lay on his bed after he was worn out from the study of Torah.[36] Indeed, he once said that it "became clear that the philosophers did not know the faculties of the soul at all in comparison with the sages of the Torah. And moreover, a simpleton like me knows more than them in this matter. Why? It is not on account of my paltry wisdom; rather, I know more than them because I have looked into our holy Torah."[37]

These tendencies manifested themselves in Ziv's version of the story. He appeals to secular sources as the origin of the story and even appears to elaborate on the story using inspiration from Plato's philosophy. However, Ziv's narrative differs from earlier versions. Unlike the Kaspi account, which concludes with Plato acknowledging the philosophical superiority of Jeremiah and learning from him, Ziv's version concludes with Plato acknowledging that he could not understand the utility of Jeremiah mourning over the past. Moreover, Ziv added that even the simplest Jew would be able to answer the question. This modified exchange highlights how wisdom alone was secondary to spiritual perfection of the Jewish soul and the divine, transcendental Torah. While earlier generations sought to instill Jewish pride by demonstrating how Western philosophy could trace its roots to Judaism, Ziv sought to stress that though there

35 Etkes 147–164; Goldberg 11–20.
36 Claussen 73–80; Katz 2:40.
37 Claussen 75–76.

was undeniably wisdom in the Western world, there was something different in the Jewish world that was even greater.

Indeed, this point continued to be stressed decades later with the publication of Lopian's version (as well as Pincus's). While it is not possible to confirm whether the attribution to *Torat Ha-Olah* was a decision made by Lopian himself or the posthumous editors, replacing the gentile source with a Jewish one underscores a further shift in the usage of the story. Like Ziv, Lopian's purpose was to highlight the difference between the two worlds and demonstrate how such philosophical pursuits were secondary to the sanctity and spirituality of the Jewish soul and the Torah. However, lending credibility to secular and gentile sources by quoting them was no longer encouraged; the sole source of wisdom for the Ḥaredi Israeli students of Lopian should emanate from the Torah. Such a decision was reflective of both Lopian's personal viewpoint (or at least those of his students who published the book), as well as of the general strategy of the Israeli Ḥaredi community to respond to the allure of external secular threats.[38]

VIII. The Contemporary Version Revisited

The story's evolution continued to evolve with Pincus's quotation. In a subsequent discourse, Pincus elaborates on what he terms "the depth of [Ziv's] words":

> The true answer is that we do not weep over the past and do not cry over spilled milk. The definition of the Temple is a place for the Divine Presence to rest. Plato thought that God left (heaven forbid) when the Temple was destroyed and will return when Moshiach comes. If that was the case, then [he was justified] in asking about the utility of crying over the past. But this was a complete mistake. God did not leave—He is always with us. When the Temple was around, it was the resting place for the Divine presence to live among us. Nowadays with the Temple destroyed, we cry not over the loss of the building, but over our desire to live together with God. This cry over the desire for closeness to God is what causes us to become close to Him. Thus, even in exile we have a "Temple"; for through crying [on Tishah B'Av] we live with and feel God.[39]

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[38] See Stadler 141–142 for observations on trends in the Ḥaredi community of Israel. For a reaction of one Lopian's students to the introduction of secular studies into a post-high school educational setting in the United States, see Yakḥtfoigel 184.

[39] Pincus 118.

Despite Pincus's assertion to the contrary, his answer appears to be somewhat different than Ziv's. Rather than tears being a medium to rebuild the Temple, Pincus characterizes the role of tears as a method of connecting to God in exile without the Temple. This is a significant departure from previous answers in both substance and focus. For hundreds, if not thousands, of years, the role of the story has been a response to Western philosophy. Whether it is Early Modern Jews in Italy asserting that Western philosophy ultimately stemmed from Jeremiah, or the *Mussar* sages like Lipkin and Ziv stressing that perfection of even the simplest Jewish soul eclipsed the great wisdom of the world, both were defensive postures towards a perceived external existential threat. Even Lopian who did not acknowledge the secular/Christian sources for the story still used the account to underscore difference between Jews and gentile scholars. Pincus, however, chooses to have an entirely internal focus—connecting with God.

This was not the first time a link was made between Ziv's answer and the role of tears as medium to connect to God in exile. In 1991, Rabbi Avrohom Chaim Feuer edited an edition of *Kinot*, lamentations traditionally recited on *Tishah B'Av*, the day on which the destruction of the Temples is mourned. This edition was published by ArtScroll, a publication company in America that produces works on traditional Jewish literature and thought for an English-speaking audience. In an extensive overview aptly titled: "Kinnos: A Trail of Tears—From Tragedy to Triumph," Feuer discusses the role of crying and mourning for the Temple on *Tishah B'Av*. Relying primarily on the works of 16th-Century Polish Jewish philosopher Judah Lowe, Feuer asserts that the role of tears is to reforge a connection between the Holy Land and the Jewish soul, and that this yearning and spiritual connection will ultimately precipitate a physical connection to the Land of Israel with ultimate redemption.[40]

Understandably, Feuer cites Lopian's account of Jeremiah's meeting with Plato along with Ziv's addition of Plato's two questions and the answer of the uniqueness of the Jewish soul to rebuild the Temple through tears. Feuer prefaces the story, however, with another comment of Lowe on the Talmud's statement (*Ḥagigah* 5b) that "God has a concealed place called *mistarim* (literally: "secrecy") where He weeps over the pride of Israel that was stripped from them and given to the nations of the world." Lowe, according to Feuer "reveals the location of God's secret hideaway—it is within the soul of every Jew… for the soul is really an aspect of God concealed within man, and that fundamental soul of man cries

[40] Feuer XI–XIII.

incessantly over the Destruction of the Temple."[41] This serves as the segue to the Jeremiah account which illustrates how only one who is truly in touch with their innermost soul and G-d is capable of crying and truly appreciating and mourning the loss of the Temple.

Feuer, a student of the Telshe seminary which was led by students of Ziv, continues to follow the path of Lipkin, Ziv, and Lopian. He stressed the uniqueness of the Jewish soul and its advantages over mere intellectual prowess, and seemed to go even further to provide a rationale for why the wise Plato was incapable of understanding Ziv's answer—that crying served to rebuild the future Temple. Without God in his soul, Plato could not appreciate and mourn the loss of the Temple and thus could not appreciate the power of tears that Jeremiah shed to reforge a relationship with the Land and God of Israel.

The cogency of Feuer's hypothesis notwithstanding, Pincus clearly echoes Feuer's innovative link to Lowe's comment and deems it "the depth of [Ziv's] words," proceeding to once again shift the emphasis of the story. While Feuer utilized the uniqueness of the Jewish soul as an extension of God and thus the medium through which the Temple is rebuilt, Pincus highlights the connection of the Jew to God in exile as an end unto itself. Such focus by both Feuer and especially Pincus implies a newly perceived threat to the Jew in exile, an attenuated connection to God.

Indeed, numerous leaders in the Ḥaredi community have highlighted this issue as a challenge for contemporary Orthodox Jewry.[42] Such a phenomenon was also noted in the 2020 Pew Report on Jewish Americans, which recorded that 25 percent of Orthodox Jews did not find spirituality highly fulfilling.[43] Former Chief Rabbi Israel Lau once diagnosed the post-Holocaust mentality as of one exhaustion; after the ravages of the Holocaust, Jews did not have the energy to contend with social, cultural, and political revolutions. Instead, the Jewish community retreated inward to focus on its own physical and cultural survival.[44] Thus, the challenges and perceived threats that this new generation with a destroyed Temple faced was not a sense of intellectual inferiority with the Western world. Jews lacked the psychological energy to be interested in such matters.[45] Jeremiah now had to prove to the world and himself that a connection to God in exile was still possible and fulfilling to the extent that it could

41 Feuer XI.
42 Bensoussan; Simmons.
43 Miller 225, 263–264.
44 Lau 194–199; Miller 301.
45 Pew Research Center, May 11, 2021, "Jewish Americans in 2020".

temporarily replace and ultimately precipitate the construction of the new Temple.

IX. Re-Examining Plato as Jeremiah's Foil

Over the centuries, there have been many versions of the meeting between Jeremiah and Plato. With all of the differences in location, dialogue, and resolutions, there is one common factor that every iteration shares—Jeremiah is in exile. While there are certainly historical motivations for such an assertion, this detail is also crucial to understanding why the story has been so important in Jewish memory, as well as the unifying factor to the ostensibly different motivations in perpetuating that memory as evidenced by the shift in focus and details of the story over the generations.

This was not a mere meeting between Athens and Jerusalem, of two different cultures and philosophies. Such an interaction could have occurred during the First or Second Jewish Commonwealth when the Temple stood in all its glory. Indeed, there are several accounts of such meetings recorded in Rabbinic, Hellenistic, and early Christian works.[46] Even in its earliest versions where the Temple's destruction is not recorded, Jeremiah and Plato had to meet in Egypt, because it was more than an exchange or competition of ideas. It was a confrontation of Jewish identity in exile.

As central a character as Plato is, his primary purpose in the narrative is to serve as a foil for Jeremiah. Whether his role is to accept the supremacy and divinity of Jewish wisdom, concede the singularity of the Jewish soul in its ability to comprehend the utility of mourning the past to build the future, or merely serve as a springboard to showcase the ability of a Jew to connect to God in exile without a Temple, Plato is there to draw out something from Jeremiah. In effect, Jeremiah is speaking to himself and to the millions of his brothers and sisters that went into exile with him.

With exile came an attenuation of identity. The Temple was destroyed, the political government dissolved, and religious scholarship existentially threatened. In the words of Jeremiah: "Her gates are sunk into the ground; He has ruined and broken her bars; her king and princes are [exiled] among the nations, [and] there is no Torah; moreover, her prophets obtain no vision from the Lord" (Lamentations 2:9). Yerushalayim's kingdom of priests and holy people teeters on the brink of utter failure.

The midrash (*Eikhah Rabbah* 2:12) adds another layer of interpretation to the verse. The subject of the phrase "there is no Torah" is ambiguous.

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46 Melamed 37–82.

The simplest understanding is that it refers to the Jews in exile lacking sufficient teachers and religious leaders. The midrash, however, argues that the subject is the "nations" mentioned earlier in the verse; while there might not be Torah among the nations, there is wisdom and knowledge which Jews must believe and accept. Thus, Plato, the wisest person that the nations of the world can offer, meets Jeremiah. He offers wisdom that ostensibly Jeremiah in exile should accept. Plato embodies the perennial challenge of the Jew living in exile—confronted by cogent, conventional wisdom emphatically declaring that their identity, heritage, and mission are no longer special. The meetings between Athens and Jerusalem by Socrates and Asaf HaKarḥi or Alexander the Great and Simon the Righteous have become irrelevant. Knowledge has moved beyond the contribution of the kingdom of priests and the holy people. More fundamentally, the very identity of that kingdom of priests and holy people was no longer relevant. Bereft of its centers of government and religion and severed from its connection to God, whatever Israel's crippled sense of self would hobble into exile would inevitably fade into the sands of time.

Jeremiah rejects this. He, his wisdom, and his people will have an enduring identity. As the midrash stated above, there is no Torah among the nations. That divine repository of knowledge and their tether to transcendence will remain with the Jews (albeit in a mitigated form), thus assuring the eternal survival of their identity. As Plato acknowledged, Jeremiah's words and actions convinced him of their divinity and thus their relevance. Such was Jeremiah's message for centuries. In the words of Isserles: "It is clear that all the wisdom of the world emanates from this line [of philosophers ultimately originating with the Jews] and indeed it is fitting that every Jew should believe this and not give our praise and glory to the gentile sages."

Over time, however, new Platos would emerge, again asserting with unimpeachable empiricism and salient logic that Jewish thought was a veritable fossil. In the era of *haskalah*, however, mere reference to the Jewish origins of Western thought were insufficient to stem the watershed attrition levels of traditional Jewish identity that ensued. Thus, the *Mussar* movement gave voice to Jeremiah anew. It inspired Plato's own arguments in *Phaedo* that built upon the historic narrative by creating a dialogue that focused on the singularity of the Jewish soul. It demonstrated that knowledge was insufficient to achieve complete self-actualization. Even the simplest Jew could achieve and understand what the wise Plato could not by simply tapping into their soul and embracing the Torah that endured in exile.

The story continued to shift in focus as a different Plato came to the forefront. Existentially exhausted, the contemporary Jeremiah was forced

to confront the Plato within. No longer was Jeremiah concerned about the intellectual and ethical superiority of Jerusalem over the secular Athens and its descendants; Ziv's singularity of the Jewish soul had addressed such arguments. But that singularity was predicated on the spiritual sensitivity of the Jewish soul and its connection to the Divine, something which Pincus, Feuer, and the Pew Report saw as deteriorating. What then could Jeremiah respond? In the words of Jeremiah as recorded in the Talmud, "where is the awesomeness of God [in exile] with the Temple desecrated by the nations" (*Yoma* 69b)? As before, the emphasis of Jeremiah's response transitioned to focus on the connection of the Jew to God without the Temple. The tears he shed were not only to rebuild the future, but also to facilitate the present. As the Talmud responds to Jeremiah's question, the Jews in exile themselves demonstrated the "awesomeness" of God; the tears of the Jewish soul in exile can serve as a Temple.

X. Conclusion

Yerushalmi devotes much time in *Zakhor* distinguishing between history and memory, ultimately arguing that modern Jewish historiography "can never substitute for Jewish memory," but also stressed how historiography should "aspire to be memorable."[47] Nineteenth-Century German Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch argued that the biblical verse Yerushalmi began his lectures with—*"Remember the days of old; reflect upon the years of [other] generations. Ask your father, and he will tell you; your elders, and they will inform you"*—reflects a similar sentiment. He noted that the aforementioned verse actually contains two directives—to remember and to understand. To remember the facts of history, one must ask one's father. But one must also seek to understand the lessons of history, something that requires the experience and wisdom of an elder.[48]

This paper has endeavored to fulfill the mandate of pursuing the "what" and the "why" to facilitate memorable historiography and Jewish memory. By comparing the various accounts of Jeremiah's alleged meeting with Plato and studying them through their respective historical and cultural contexts, one can build a model mapping the story's evolution from its terse Medieval and Early-Modern iterations, to the more expansive versions utilized in the 19th and 20th Centuries. Beyond the technical details of the sequence of what was added and how, one can also utilize the historical context of the speakers and authors to understand the inspiration and motivation for why certain details were added, modified, or

47 Yerushalmi 101.
48 Hirsch 592–593.

stressed. The tale of Jeremiah and Plato's meeting has served various functions throughout the years, but they all share the common challenge of the Jews in exile struggling to explain to others and, primarily, themselves how their national identity inexorably linked to knowledge and God continues to endure and remain salient and relevant in exile. Some of those explanations can be understood by Plato and some cannot. Perhaps the latter can only be properly understood within the context of Jeremiah's memory and tears.

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