

Akiva's Crown of Thorns:

Divine Violence and the Inversion of Rabbinic Theodicy

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1. Introduction.

This article will focus on two Talmudic texts that contradict the traditional version of rabbinic theodicy, the justification of God's goodness in the face of evil, along with a scriptural intertext for both of them.¹ The first text is a narrative about the death of Rabbi Akiva found in the Babylonian Talmud (or *Bavli*), *Menahot* 29b. It represents the most outrageous violence as the will of a seemingly uncaring God. (Section 2.) This famous *aggadah*, which is an overt repudiation of theodicy, has an intimate though unspoken relationship with the verses in Exodus that proclaim the thirteen attributes of mercy. We will show that it may be read as a kind of deconstruction of the Exodus passage. (Section 3.) Significantly, several versions of normative rabbinic theodicy—known in rabbinic literature as the problem of “*tzadik v'ra lo* / the righteous person to whom evil [befalls]” (translated below as “a righteous person who has it bad”)—are derived from these same Exodus verses in the *Bavli* at *Berakhot* 7a. However, in light of our reading of the story in *Menahot*, the rhetorical thrust of the long passage in *Berakhot* will be shown to stand in bold contrast to the theodicies it quotes.² Instead, we will show that it teaches that there is an ineluctable element of violence within God that cannot be overcome or explained away by any theodicy. (Section 4.)

The relationship between *Menahot* 29b and the Exodus passage is mediated by the tension

between the words “*panim/face*” and “*ahor/back*,” which appear in both texts, used both in their normal senses, and idiomatically in the sense of “before” and “behind” or “present” and “past.” In order to make these relationships explicit, the translations we use will be hyper-literal. For example, and most importantly, *lefanav* is translated “to his face” rather than “before him.” The way in which such non-idiomatic translations “brush against the grain” will facilitate using reading strategies that depend upon resonances at the linguistic level of words and letters—even to the point of “*drashing* (interpreting) every *et*,” to quote another famous tradition about Rabbi Akiva.³

Approached in this way, questions about authorship or intention, will not be the focus of our particular reading.⁴ Hoping to face these texts, to hear what called out to the people who shaped and preserved them, is our goal. The encounter is one which, if it occurs, will stand outside our “theology” of reading as well as our understanding of “the theology of the rabbis.” Our priority will not be to “add a new region to comprehend,” to quote Levinas, but to become open to something that is “irreducible to phenomenality.”⁵ In practical terms, this means that this reading will not lead to a restatement of rabbinic theology or theodicy. Thus I have two goals here: one is to read the texts, to face them; the other is to show how such a reading of these texts forestalls any static theological interpretation of rabbinic theodicy.

2. *Menahot* 29b

Few *aggadot* grab one’s attention, few are so riveting or breath-stopping, as the story of Moshe giving witness to Rabbi Akiva’s fate in *Menahot* 29b. Few raise so many questions concerning the rabbis’ self-consciousness about the religious revolution they carried out and concealed by means of midrash. None state more directly the problem of theodicy and the experience of evil. There are many readings of this text concerned with the theology underlying *halakhah* or martyrdom or with the evolution of rabbinic theodicy.⁶ However, we will pay primary attention not to what this passage claims or believes about these questions, but to how it operates structurally and semiotically.⁷ Here is the passage:

Said Rav Yehudah, said Rav:
In the hour when Moshe ascended to the height [to receive the Torah],
he found the Holy One who is [sic] sitting and tying crowns to the letters.
He said to His face (before Him): Master of the world,
who hinders (lit. holds back on) Your hand?
He said to him: There is one man destined to be
at the end of so many generations,
and Akiva ben Yosef is his name,
who is destined to *drash* over each and every thorn
heaps and heaps of laws.

He said to His face: Master of the world, show him to me!
He said to him: Turn to your back.
He went and sat at the end of eight rows,
and he did not know what they were saying.
His strength dissipated.
When [Akiva] reached a certain thing, his students said to him:
Rabbi, from where [does this come] to you?
He said to them: It's a tradition through Moshe from Sinai.
[Moshe's] mind was restored.

He turned and came to the face of (before) the Holy One.
He said to His face: Master of the world, there's a person like this,
and you're giving the Torah by my hand?
He said to him: Be silent!
Thus it ascended in thought to My face (before me).

He said to His face: Master of the world, you showed me his Torah.
Show me his reward.
He said to him: Turn to your back. He turned to his back.
He saw that they were weighing [Akiva's] flesh in the scales.
He said to His face:
Master of the world, this is Torah and this is her reward?!
He said to him: Be silent!
Thus it ascended in thought to My face (before me).

אמר רב יהודה אמר רב:
בשעה שעלה משה למרום
מצאו להקב"ה שיושב וקושר כתרים לאותיות.
אמר לפניו: רבש"ע,
מי מעכב על ידך?
אמר לו: אדם אחד יש שעתידי להיות
בסוף כמה דורות
ועקיבא בן יוסף שמו
שעתידי לדרוש על כל קוץ וקוץ
תילין תילין של הלכות.

אמר לפניו: רבש"ע, הראהו לי!
אמר לו: חזור לאחורך.
הלך וישב בסוף שמונה שורות,
ולא היה יודע מה הן אומרים.
תשש כחו.
כיון שהגיע לדבר אחד אמרו לו תלמידיו:
רבי, מנין לך?
אמר להן: הלכה למשה מסיני.
נתיישרה דעתו.

חזר ובא לפני הקב"ה.
אמר לפניו: רבנו של עולם יש לך אדם כזה,
ואתה נותן תורה ע"י?
אמר לו: שתוק!
כך עלה במחשבה לפני.

אמר לפניו: רבנו של עולם, הראיתני תורתו.
הראני שכרו.
אמר לו: חזור [לאחורך]. חזר לאחוריו.
ראה ששוקלין בשרו במקולין.
אמר לפניו:
רבש"ע, זו תורה וזו שכרה?!
א"ל: שתוק!
כך עלה במחשבה לפני.

Our story is first concerned or anxious about what appears superfluous, about what is added without showing meaning, the *k'tarim* or crowns that are found on the hand-written letters of a Torah scroll. Moshe goes up to Heaven, literally “to the height,” to receive the Torah. There he finds the Holy One, “sitting,” as it were hunched over the worktable or sewing table,⁸ knotting these threads or streaks that we call *tagin*, also meaning “crowns,” to the letters of the Torah. This work turns God away from Moshe, away from the task at hand, which is to hand down the Torah to the prophet.⁹ Confronted with this situation, Moshe suddenly feels his own presence to be extravagant. “*Mi m'akev¹⁰ yadekha?*” he

asks. “Who hinders your hand” from giving me the Torah, or, who forces you to add to the Torah?—not what, but who—as though Moshe knows this extra bit of piece work cannot be for him. Moshe already assumes that what is going on is somehow beyond his comprehension, that the Holy One is not speaking to Moshe but only through him. When God confirms that R. Akiva will come after many generations to interpret “heaps and heaps of laws” for each and every “thorn,” Moshe wants to see for himself.¹¹

Moshe is speaking before the Holy One, to His face, in His presence. He is told, “*Hazar l’ahorekha // Turn to your back.*” Because he asks to see, he must turn, away from the Holy One. He must turn his back on God, toward what comes after him, toward his own back. The limit of one’s vision is defined by one’s back, what is behind and beyond the line of sight. The limit of vision when one is before God’s presence, *lifne hakodesh barukh hu*, is the face of the Holy One itself, which fills all sight. The first limit is imposed by the finitude of one’s own body or presence, the second limit is imposed by the infinite presence which eclipses any Other. Moshe must exceed both of these limits in order to confront this vision.

When Moshe turns, he is caught: caught between future and present, caught between revelation and human knowing, between the role of prophet and dunce, between the back and the face. Moshe’s presence in Akiva’s classroom is a form of absence; he is neither inside nor outside, seated in the eighth or last row. Moshe sees without being seen. When he turns, Moshe’s back becomes his face, but what he sees is still, so to speak, to his back, that is, beyond his limits. He cannot understand what is being said about his Torah. Like the crowns at the beginning of the text, Moshe is left waiting to be made significant.

The weakness he experiences in this moment is relieved when he hears Akiva explaining that what he has taught is “*halakhah l’Mosheh misinai*”—Moshe’s law from Sinai. Moshe is restored to himself when he recognizes his own name, as it says, “*mityashev da’ato / his mind was settled,*”¹² but he is not restored to Torah, that is, to his role as receiver of the Torah. Though he is recognized as the

author he still does not recognize the text. That is why when he turns back to the Holy One, he still asks, “You have such a person and you give Torah by my hand?” Even when Moshe’s name stands behind the law as sign and signature, Moshe himself remains confounded.

Nor can Moshe simply turn back to find meaning. Returning to face the Holy One, Moshe finds: no answer, no comprehension, no compassion. He does not find out why Torah is being given by “his hand.” Instead, God tells him, “Be silent! Thus it ascended in thought to My face.” What arises “*l’fanai*”—“to My face”—will not explain itself; instead it will silence its questioner: “*Kakh!* Thus!” Moshe turns looking for meaning, but as he faces what is shown to him, it becomes a kind of presence that has no meaning.

Moshe would like to experience presence, and then turn to meaning, and then to presence, safely recollecting each in the face of the other, but he cannot. He cannot turn to face his back, then his face, because the horizon of his vision, his human limit, reestablishes itself at each turn. To turn back to the Holy One therefore means to again exceed the limits of his vision, not to return to God’s presence but still to chase after meaning, which has already become a kind of absence.

Even in the face of this loss, even facing this God and this answer, Moshe cannot resist asking to see more: Akiva’s reward, his after, so to speak, i.e., Akiva’s back, which turns out to be his ultimate otherness, flesh in the market, the absolute alienation of presence from meaning. He cannot resist himself, and so he turns. At this turn, the third time that Moshe turns around, the text says, “He turned and he saw.” Moshe has encountered a new scene at each juncture of the story, but only now does it say that he “saw.”

Unlike the first instances, what he sees is overwhelming—so much so that all that exists for him is seeing, even to the exclusion of God. Our story has completely leapt over all the poignant *aggadot* which portray Akiva’s heroism and faith in the face of Roman torture—all the stories that attempt to find meaning in the face of evil and annihilation.¹³ All we have left of Akiva is his flesh being weighed

out in the marketplace.

Moshe cannot resist being shown, he cannot avoid his need to know, he must face an Other, an Other which has no face, flesh being cut in pieces: a back without a face, so to speak. Moshe has no time “to recover meaning despite death.”¹⁴

God is now at Moshe’s back, behind Moshe, what comes after Moshe rather than what stands before Moshe, what exceeds vision or meaning, rather than what guarantees meaning. For the second time, God stands in the place of absence. This time, seeing what he sees, knowing what he knows of God’s silence, Moshe does not turn back to face the Holy One, as he did before. The text does not say he turned back.

Instead, Moshe addresses himself directly to what he sees, as though he asked not God but the scene before him, the future as it were, to give him the answer. “*Zu Torah v’zu s’kharah?* This is Torah and this is her reward?” Moshe asks. Moshe had first asked to see his, Akiva’s, reward. Now he reframes what he sees. It is her, Torah’s, reward. She becomes as it were the face of God and the face of the Other, standing in the place of Akiva and Moshe before God, and in the place of God before Moshe. But Moshe’s strategy, if it can be called such, of addressing the Torah, the future, the world, in the place of God, is of no consequence. The answer remains, “*Shtok!* Silence!” Moshe stands abandoned, without presence and without meaning.

Presence and meaning are two poles of experience that are not encountered together in this *aggadah*. Each time Moshe turns, he faces a new loss of meaning, and a new alienation. “To turn” means to risk, and to lose, both meaning and presence. It is going beyond the limits of vision, seeing one’s own back. When Moshe enters into this limit, surpasses it, even at God’s invitation, he does not enter into meaning. Instead Moshe enters nothing more than a new and intimidating presence, for he cannot read what he sees.

There seems to be no escape for Moshe. Like Lot’s wife, Moshe cannot avoid looking

backward. Every time he turns, his reward is always a new deferral, a greater loss. The Holy One, who grants Moshe's requests to see, forestalls any chance for Moshe to find what he seeks, by the infinity of His presence, alluded to in the statement: "*Kakh alah b'mahshavah l'fanai* // Thus it ascended in thought to My face."¹⁵ Moshe struggles to find meaning in the extravagant, to find the necessity of the *tagin*, only to find at each subsequent turn that he, Akiva, and Torah itself, like the *tagin*, are all in some way extravagant, supplemental: they are consequences of a passing thought, *sui generis*, without cause or connection to a greater chain of meaning. This is "the law of the *tagin*," so to speak, which Moshe the lawgiver cannot face, yet which he is forced to face.

In the course of these transformations, God's face itself is bewilderingly transformed from a divine artisan embroidering the Torah, to a source of divine violence who is the "sign and seal," the guarantor, "of sacred execution."¹⁶ The knot or *keshet* that binds presence and meaning, present and future, is a knot that cannot be delineated or made rational; it cannot be weighed out, measured, understood or balanced. This knot ties together fated and fatal transformations. It cannot be refused by Moshe, or by God. Only the question of its meaning can be refused.¹⁷

The first of these transformations, the deadliest perhaps, happens almost without notice. When Moshe asks about the crowns on the letters, the Holy One responds using a different name, *kotz* or "thorn," to refer to them.¹⁸ In the passage between what Moshe encounters and what God speaks, the crowns of the letters become, in the Holy One's words, thorns, "*kol kotz v'kotz*." Though the *tagin* may be supplemental, it is not the *tagin* themselves, but the naming of the *tagin*, which is the dangerous supplement. In the naming of that which marks the sacred writing, the man for whom the marks are destined is marked for death. R Akiva's crown of thorns is the Torah.

3. Exodus 33.13–23

The play between what is shown and what is named, between presence and seeing, between face and back, is already well-rehearsed within the Torah herself. In a passage between the giving of the first

and the second *luchot* (the stone tablets of the ten commandments), a passage which is mediated by the episode of the golden calf, we are witnesses to a supremely intimate barter over the meaning of God's face. This barter takes place between Moshe and God when Moshe asks God to show him God's glory:

33.12. And Moshe said... 13. "And now, if, please, I have found grace in Your eyes, make me please know Your ways *hodi'eni na et d'rakhekha...*" 14. And He said, "My face will go, and I will grant rest to you." And he said, "If it isn't Your face that goes with us, don't bring us up from this."

18. And he said to Him, "Show me Your glory. *Har'eni na et k'vodekha.*" 19. And He said, "I, I will make my good pass by, over your face, and I will call out in YHVH's name to your face; and I will show grace to whichever I will show grace, and I will show mercy to whichever I will show mercy." 20. And He said, "You are not able to see My face, for a human will not see Me and live."

21. And YHVH said, "Here [is] a place with Me, and you will stand on the rock. 22. And it will be, in My glory passing by...and I will make my palm shelter you until I am passed by, 23. and I will remove My palm and you will see My back, and My face will not be seen."

34.5 And YHVH came down in a cloud and stood Himself with him and called out in YHVH's name. 6. And YHVH passed over his face and called out, "YHVH, YHVH, God merciful and gracious..."¹⁹ (Hebrew follows article)

Like *Menahot*, these verses from Exodus describe the moments preceding revelation. They turn on the tension between showing the face and seeing the back, between what is asked for and what is granted. "*Har'ehu li | Har'eni na // Show him to me | Show me please,*" "*Hazar l'ahorekha | V'ra'ita et ahorai // Turn to your back | And you will see My back*": the two texts both thematize the exchange of face/back.²⁰ In both, seeing as visual presentation or representation is presented as potentially fatal: "*Lo yir'ani ha'adam vahai // A human being may not see me and live,*" God explains in Exodus. This statement is perversely actualized in *Menahot*, where Moshe's insistence on seeing somehow entails Akiva's death.

"*Har'eni na et k'vodekha,*" Moshe asks, "Show me please your glory." God responds, "You cannot see My face." God renames Moshe's desire to see God's *glory* as a desire to see God's *panim*, God's face. The tie between "*kavod*" (glory, or presence, as it is generally interpreted by the rabbis), and the face of God (a more substantive simile for presence), is both mystified and concretized in God's refusal.

We have assumed the equation between face and presence up until now. In Exodus, we see that the equation is part of the inheritance on which the *aggadah* in *Menahot* is based. "Seeing the back," in contrast to the face, refers to a way of understanding through naming rather than presence. Even though God promises Moshe, "you will see my back," Moshe does not see or face anything, as it says,

“*Hashem* passed over his face.” He does not see, but only hears, God’s names called out to him:

“*YHVH, YHVH el rahum v’hanun // Hashem, Hashem, God merciful and gracious...*” We might say that “*ahorai/My back*” refers to the consequence of God’s presence as it passes into absence. It means the leaving of presence, what is lost or left behind “as My presence/glory passes by...until I am passed.” To see God’s back means to enter into divine meaning rather than divine presence, to experience God’s “afterward.”

The passage from presence to meaning in Exodus is mediated by the passage of time. What is left behind after God’s presence has passed are names, as if language could hold on to the trace of presence, like a kind of “second sight.” Hence, “seeing the back” names a form of understanding which is both connected to seeing and presence, yet which excludes sight. Moshe gets to understand, but he cannot see, cannot be allowed to see. In *Menahot*, the converse transpires: Moshe gets to see, but he will not be allowed to understand.

While in both texts seeing is connected to presence, in *Menahot* the second sight which God grants Moshe only appears to have presence. It is always called “turning,” as though it were an aversion of sight. Moshe: finds, turns, goes, sits, turns, comes, turns; he does not “see,” until the last turn, when he “sees” Akiva’s flesh being weighed. What Moshe sees is “*atid*,” not in the past or passing by, but in the future or after. It is *l’ahorekha*, “to Moshe’s back” rather than “to God’s back,” a detour which is already removed from God. The reality and inevitability of what Moshe sees in *Menahot* contrasts with the fact that the manner of seeing is itself a form of illusion. The relationship between presence and time is dissolved, so that Moshe is confronted with a spectacle of scattered, disjointed flashbacks, or flash-forwards, that have no sequence or logic.²¹ “Turn to your back” thus refers to a kind of seeing in which there remains no trace of presence; even in language, even especially in language, only silence, *sh’tikah*, remains.

The extraordinary resonance between the passage from Exodus and the *aggadah* from *Menahot* is offset by many dissonances between the two texts, dissonances that are reflected in their different

meanings for “face” and “back.” If Exodus shows that the distance between presence and meaning can be overcome, *Menahot* shows that the attempt to do so is futile and fatal. If Exodus tells us that time conducts presence, *Menahot* shows time collapsed into unilluminated singularities.²² If Exodus affirms that God’s justice is a positive reality, that God is “*notzer hesed la’alafim // storing up lovingkindness to thousands [of generations],*” then *Menahot* defines the limits of this justice and affirms the inexplicability and violence of God.

The relationship between the two texts is dialectical and nihilistic. *Menahot* seems to be a direct response to the hopes embodied in the name “*el rahum v’hanun.*” As Jeffrey Rubenstein writes, “[Moshe] at least sees God’s back in the Bible, whereas in the story he is basically turned back...”²³ To speak anachronistically, the *aggadah* from *Menahot*, without ever citing the passage from Exodus, lays down a line of deconstruction. This line is defined by the points in each text when Moshe pleads, “Show me.” Following this line, we are led from the Torah’s association of God’s face with God’s goodness, to the equation of God’s face and Akiva’s death, in the statement, “*Kakh alah...l’fanai / Thus it ascended...to My face.*”

4. *Berakhot 7a*

We traced this line by tracing the image of God’s face. I want to be mindful of the fact that we were able to locate this question only through a very close reading of *Menahot*, which raises the question of God’s face tangentially, *derekh agav*, so to speak. But *Menahot* is not the only place in the *Bavli* which struggles with this question; several *sugyot* in *b.Berakhot* confront the meaning of God’s face explicitly.

In light of the framework we have developed, the entirety of *Ber. 7a* can be read as a meditation on the relationship between God’s face and God’s anger. This meditation is grounded in reading the same verses from Exodus that we have examined. The reading begins at “*panai yelehu / My face will go*” and continues through “*v’hasiroti kapai v’ra’ita et ahorai // and I will remove My palm and you will see My back.*”

In the middle of the page, one of the classic statements of theodicy in rabbinic literature is brought to bear on these verses. Several answers to the question of why there are righteous people who suffer are given; none are allowed to remain standing. On the contrary, the Torah passage from Exodus, which on the face of things affirms the reality of God's justice, is read by the Talmud as denying any justification of God. What is extraordinary about the course of these readings is that the Torah passage is deformed and reformed by the Talmud until it becomes consistent with our passage from *Menahot*.

Here is the first section of *Berakhot 7b*.

R. Yohanan said in the name of R. Yosi: From where [do we know] that the Holy One prays? That it's said (Isa. 56.7), "...and they will rejoice in the house of My prayer." "Their prayer" isn't said, but "*t'filati* / My prayer"...What does He pray? Said R. Zutra bar Tuvia, said Rav: "May it be willed before My face (May it be My will) that My mercies will conquer My anger/*ka'asi*..."²⁴

And R. Yohanan said in the name of R. Yosi: From where [do we know] that there's no appeasing a person in the time of his anger. That it's written, "My face will go by, and I will make rest for you." The Holy One said to Moshe: Wait for Me, until the face of rage / *panim shel zo'am* passes by, and I will remain with you. And is there rage before the Holy One? Yes, for it's taught (Ps. 7.12), "And God is enraged every day // *El zo'em b'khol yom*." And how much is His rage? A moment/*rega*. And how much is a moment? One 58,888th of an hour—this is a moment. And there isn't any creature who knows how to intend this very hour (to know when it occurs) except Bil'am the wicked/*harasha*...

And how much is a moment? Said R. Avin...: A moment is like [the time it takes in] saying it. And from where [do we know] that a moment means seething/*retah*? That it's said (Ps. 30.6), "A moment in His wrath/*apo*, a lifetime in His desire/favor," or if you want, from here (Isa. 26.20), "Wait a little moment until rage passes by." And when is [there] seething? Abaye said: In first three hours [of the day] when a cock's comb/crest/*karbalta* is white...In any [other] hour there are red streaks in it; in this hour there are no red streaks in it...

It was taught in R. Meir's name: In the hour that the sun shines forth and all the kings of the East and West place their crowns on their heads and bow to the sun, immediately the Holy One is angered... (Hebrew follows article)

It's clear from the beginning of the page where the *Gemara* is going. God needs to pray to himself to let His mercy overcome His anger. God is somehow outside God's own control. God's face is the face of rage, "*panim shel zo'am*," which must be allowed to pass by, as it says, "My face will go..." The *p'shat* or plain meaning of this verse is that God's face, God's presence, will join Israel as they go up to the land of the covenant. But the Talmud turns the verse around: God's face must go ahead of Israel, because otherwise God's rage would destroy them. God can protect Moshe for the moment by letting God's face, which is God's rage, pass by, but God cannot make this rage disappear.

The teaching that follows is structured around the idea that there is a *rega*, a moment of rage, which is an essential facet of God's presence. The rabbis would like this moment to disappear into nothingness, but no matter how their interpretations minimize God's anger, no matter how small a *rega* is, even if it is only 1/58,888th of an hour, it still exists. This rage cannot be confronted, because God's

face cannot be seen, but it also cannot be avoided; it is as though it were part of the structure of the cosmos.²⁵ The face, the rage, must appear and must be allowed to pass by. In doing so, it leaves its trace.

As in *Menahot*, we find in *Berakhot* that deadly anger proceeds from small gestures, from infinitesimal moments. We hear that the rage which is represented by God's face is kindled when the kings of the nations first put on their crowns and bow to the sun; it is kindled when the comb (or crown) on a rooster is white, before it has any red streaks in it. As in *Menahot*, where God's anger is mysteriously connected to tying the crowns on the letters, everything here is related to crowns: crest, *keter*, *karbalta*. From these moments emerge the fatal consequences: crowns become thorns, flesh is streaked with red. And so, as the face of rage passes by, the back is seen.

It is in the wake of these images that we finally arrive at a statement of rabbinic theodicy:

R. Yohanan said in the name of R. Yosi: Three things Moshe sought from the face of the Holy One, and He gave [them] to him: [Moshe] sought that the *Shekhinah* will dwell/be loosed over Israel, and He gave it to him, for it's said (Exod. 33.16), "Is it not in Your going with us...?" He sought that the *Shekhinah* would not dwell over star worshippers (idolaters), for it is said, "...and in our being distinguished, I and Your people?" And he sought that He would make [Moshe] know the ways of the Holy One and He gave it to him, as it is said (Exod. 33.13), "Make me know Your ways."

He said to His face: Master of the world, why is there a righteous person who has it good, a righteous person who has it bad, a wicked person who has it good, a wicked person who has it bad? // *Mip'ne mah yesh tzadik v'tov lo, tzadik v'ra lo, rasha v'tov lo, rasha v'ra lo?* He said to him: Moshe, a righteous person who has it good is a son of a righteous person / *tzadik ben tzadik*, a righteous person who has it bad is a son of a wicked person / *tzadik ben rasha*...

A master said: A righteous person who has it good is a son of a righteous person, a righteous person who has it bad is a son of a wicked person—is it so? But it is written (Exod. 34.7), "visiting fathers' sins upon sons," and it is written, (Deut. 24.16) "and sons will not be made to die for fathers." They slammed the verses against each other, and they taught: It's not a problem. This [verse applies] when they grasp their fathers' work in their hands, and that [verse applies] when they don't grasp their father's works in their hands. (If so, a righteous person who is the son of a wicked person, who therefore does not grasp his father's works, should not be punished—so the whole previous explanation of *tzadik v'ra lo* must be rejected.)

Rather, He said to him: a *tzadik v'tov lo* is a complete[ly] righteous person, and a *tzadik v'ra lo* is a righteous person who isn't complete.

"The *tzadik* that has it good, the *tzadik* that has it bad (*tzadik v'ra lo*), the *rasha* that has it good, the *rasha* that has it bad, why is it like this?" the Talmud in *Berakhot* asks. "*Mip'ne mah?*"—literally, "From the face of what?" Two or three answers are given, depending on how one counts: the first, that the difference between one who has it good and one who has it bad is that one is the son of *tzadik*, the other the son of a *rasha*. The second, which is used to refute the first, is that this applies when "they grasp their father's works in their hands." The third is that only a complete *tzadik* among *tzadikim*, a

tzadik gamor, has it good; only a complete *rasha* among *r'sha'yim* has it bad.²⁶

According to R. Yohanan, the answer to the question “*Mip'ne mah?*” is one of three things that Moshe sought from the Holy One. R. Yohanan situates these three things in a dialogue between Moshe and the Holy One, and he finds the question of *tzadik v'ra lo* embedded in Moshe's request to God to “make me know Your ways.” This phrase, “*Hodi'eni na et d'rakhekha*,” comes from the verses that immediately precede the Exodus verses we have connected to *Menahot*. The Talmud, however, does not leave this question, or any of its answers, in their place. By examining the turns of the discussion, we can see how the Talmud in *Berakhot* rejects all attempts to explain “*tzadik v'ra lo*,” while at the same time shifting the answers, or non-answers, from the phrase “Make me know Your ways,” to the phrase “Show me Your face.”²⁷

The first solution given in *Berakhot* issues from God's mouth: “Moshe, a *tzadik* who has it good is a *tzadik ben tzadik*...” Then, the next statement is brought to undermine both the content and the source of this answer. We have a tradition that a child is not punished for the sins of the parent unless the child “grasps” the same works as the parent, based on scriptural verses. How can patrimony determine the reward even of a *tzadik*, when a *tzadik ben rasha* is by definition one who “doesn't grasp his father's work in his hands”? This undermines the first answer but it does not provide a new resting place for the question of suffering and justice, because it still does not explain why there is a *tzadik v'ra lo*. The last solution the Talmud offers is a complete substitution for the first answer: the *tzadik v'tov lo* is a “*tzadik gamor* / completely righteous person.”

This would seem to be a valid answer, but it is not where the *sugya* rests, because R. Meir and then R. Y'hoshua ben Korhah immediately shift us away from it. The Holy One, they say, refused to give an answer when Moshe asked about *tzadik v'ra lo*:

And [all of this] is in conflict with R. Meir, for R. Meir said: Two things He gave to [Moshe], and one He didn't give to him, for it is said (Exod. 33.19), “I will show grace to whomever I will show grace” even though it is not fair (or: even when he is not decent) // *af al pi she'eyno hagun*, “and I will show mercy to whomever I will show mercy” even though it is not fair.

“And He said (Exod. 33.22), ‘You may not see My face’”—It was taught in the name of R. Y'hoshua ben Korhah: So said the Holy One to Moshe: When I wanted [to show you My face] you didn't want it; now that you want [to see My

face] I don't want it. (This again indicates that Moshe didn't receive what he asked for.)

And it is [also] in conflict with R. Shmuel bar Nahmani...for [he] said: In reward for three things he merited three things. In reward for "Moshe hid his face" (Exod. 3.6) he merited radiance of face (Exod. 34.30); in reward for "and he was afraid" he merited "and they were afraid of approaching him"; in reward for "to look" he merited "and he looks at YHVH's face." (Num. 12.8) (This again indicates that the three things that Moshe received did not include the explanation of *tzadik v'ra lo*.)

God's refusal is given a scriptural foundation by R. Meir, and then a scriptural and aggadic foundation by R. Y'hoshua ben Korhah. Finally, R. Shmuel bar Nahmani's statement returns us to the claim that Moshe did receive three things, not just two—but none of these three things has anything to do with the problem of *tzadik v'ra lo*. It is as if R. Sh'muel bar Nahmani's understanding of the question replaces the previous ones, diverting us away from the question of the *tzadik v'ra lo* to safer ground.

The flow of the *Gemara* shows that the *stam* (the anonymous editorial voice) does not leave standing any possibility that God answered Moshe's question, "*Mip'ne ma yesh tzadik v'ra lo?*" Even the question itself does not stand. The only thing that remains with us, the only thing given the divine seal of both scripture and *aggadah*, is God's refusal to answer.

This occurs in a most concrete way. God's refusal is transposed to the locus of the verses that parallel the passage from *Menahot*. This transposition is coincident with the transformation of the affirmation of God's justice into a negation. The *stam* adheres to this transposition/transformation by placing R. Meir's and R. Y'hoshua's interpretations in a rhetorical position of finality, after the others.

According to R. Meir, Moshe received oaths about God's grace, just as Moshe received oaths about God's presence according to R. Yohanan. But in R. Meir's *drash*, this oath is read as a negation of justice: "I will show grace to whichever I will show grace, I will show mercy to whichever I will show mercy," even though it's not fair—even when it violates justice.²⁸

According to R. Y'hoshua ben Korhah, Moshe was denied with the words: "you cannot see My face." But it was when Moshe asked, "*Har'eni na et k'vodekha // Show me Your glory*" that God first responded, "I will show grace to whichever I will show grace..." and then said, "you cannot see My

face.” Hence, whereas in R. Yohanan’s *drash* the question of *tzadik v’ra lo* was tied to the phrase “*Hodi’eni na et d’rakhekha*,” in both R. Meir’s and R. Y’hoshua’s interpretations, the question of *tzadik v’ra lo* is tied to “*Har’eni na et k’vodekha*.” The locus of verses has shifted to the same verses that we connected to *Menahot*.

R. Y’hoshua ben Korhah adds one more level to this refusal: “When I wanted [to show you My face] you didn’t want it...” The Holy One says, in effect, “I could reveal the solution of *tzadik v’ra lo*, Moshe, but because you would not face me at the burning bush, when I wanted to do so, I’m not going to.”²⁹ R. Shmuel bar Nahmani’s statement does us one turn better, replacing the whole question of seeing God’s face with the transformation of Moshe’s face: because Moshe hid his face, his face is made radiant, because he was afraid of God’s face, Israel is afraid of his face.³⁰ As in *Menahot*, where Moshe’s back replaced God’s back, here Moshe’s face replaces God’s face. Moshe’s face even becomes like God’s face: just as God cannot be faced, so Moshe cannot be faced. In either framework, Moshe does not get to see God’s face, and he does not get to understand *tzadik v’ra lo*.

If there is no face to evil (or only God’s face), and no explanation, it raises another question: If Moshe knew that “this is Torah and this is her reward,” why did he accept the Torah at all?³¹ Only a Moshe who becomes like God, whom the people are afraid to look at, could have accepted a God who says, “*Kakh alah b’mahshavah l’fanai*.”

5. God’s *Tefilin* Knot

What did Moshe see, if he did not see God’s face? The *Gemara* in *Ber. 7a* continues:

“And I will remove My palm and you will see My back”—Said R. Chana bar Bizna...: It teaches that the Holy One showed Moshe a *tefilin* knot / *keshet shel t’filin*.

And R. Yohanan said in the name of R. Yosi: Each and every word that goes out from the Holy One’s mouth for good, even if it is only said conditionally, He does not turn from doing it / *hazar bo* (doesn’t relent from doing it). From where [is this made known] to us? From Moshe Rabenu, for it’s said (Deut. 9.14), “Yield from Me / *heref mimeni* and I will destroy [the people]...and I will make you become a powerful nation [and numerous beyond them]”—even though Moshe sought mercy [for the people] and that ascended (happened), this [promise of becoming a numerous nation] was fulfilled in Moshe’s descendants...

“[Y]ou will see My back”—this means that “the Holy One showed Moshe a *tefilin* knot,”³²

“*kesher shel t'filin*,” specifically God’s tefilin knot. It should be a simple image, even an uplifting image.³³ Perhaps we have arrived at this point simply because of the continuity of the verses. But the intertextual references overwhelm other interpretations of the text. What Moshe sees is the *kesher* or knot of the One who is “*kosher tagin*,” who knots or ties crowns. This time the *kesher* is not tied by God’s hand, not what ties the *tagin* to the letters, but the knot over which even God has no power, which is to God’s own back—the deadly knot which binds together “*kol tuvi* / all My goodness” with “*shoklin et b’saro* / they weighed his flesh.”

Berakhot ends on what sounds like a hopeful note: Every word that goes forth from God’s mouth for good, even *al tanai*, even conditionally, is upheld. But even this good word is grounded in a verse which rehearses God’s violence. How do we know that God fulfills the good? Because God said to Moshe, “Yield from me and I will destroy them...”³⁴ Even though God did not destroy Israel, God still made Moshe a great nation. But this God remains the God who in “a moment” could destroy them.

What about the God that shows Moshe Akiva’s destruction, something that should be *al tanai*, and yet refuses to turn it around? For what should be conditional if not the vision Moshe is given of Akiva? Both images of Akiva, the image of the teacher and the violent image of the carcass, are brought into being by God. The Holy One refuses to be “*hazar bahem*,” to turn back on them, to relent. All these images rise up “*b’mahshavah l’fanai*,” *kol dibur v’dibur, kol kotz v’katz*, every word, every crown, every thorn.

In both *Berakhot* and *Menahot*, God refuses to answer questions. God turns Moshe’s words around, but God will not turn God’s words around, nor will God turn around. It is Moshe who must turn; it is Akiva, who turns words around, who explains every *et*, who must be turned.

6. Conclusion.

What then does it mean to talk about “rabbinic theodicy”? Certainly there was a time when “*tzadik v’ra lo hu tzadik she’eyno gamor*” was an accepted answer; the Talmud in *Berakhot* must

preserve this statement from such a time.³⁵ But the Talmudic passage we have studied does not attest to this statement being taken seriously. On the contrary, God is not seen as just in this context any more than God is portrayed as just in *Menahot*. Not only are several explanations for suffering passed over, but the source of both God's injustice and God's goodness is located in God's arbitrary and ineluctable rage. Even more pointedly, God's rage is located in those verses that most speak of God's mercy.

Menahot, which seems to argue with the passage from Exodus, becomes in the light of *Berakhot* a shocking realization of it. For *Berakhot* is not only skeptical of theodicy, as many others have noted.³⁶ It is certain that the divine, at its root, manifests uncontrollable violence. R. Meir says that Moshe asked to be shown, and he was refused. In light of the broader context of *Ber. 7a*, *Menahot* can be read as the story of this refusal. *Berakhot* undermines Exodus through the most classical of midrashic and Talmudic methods; *Menahot* does the same thing through connections which are readable through a deconstructive lens.

The passage from *Berakhot* is a *locus classicus* of rabbinic theodicy. Given our analysis, can we claim that the rabbis believed in this theodicy? The picture of radical anti-theodicy drawn by these texts can only undermine the proto-theological thrust of the individual traditions about *tzadik v'ra lo* that are brought together in the *Berakhot* passage.

The texts from *Menahot* and *Berakhot* may have been redacted without awareness of each other. However, given the thickness of intertextual links between the two texts, as well as between *Menahot* and the Torah passage that *Berakhot* comments upon, it seems likely that *Menahot* was aware of *Berakhot* in some form.³⁷ David Kraemer sees a progression from earlier rabbinic texts, both the *Midrashim* and the *Yerushalmi*, to the *Bavli*, specifically, from a genre and era when traditional explanations of suffering were accepted as true, to a time when these explanations were questioned.³⁸ One might say that the *Menahot* passage is further along on this trajectory than the *Berakhot* passage is, but both are grounded in a profound skepticism about whether human beings can understand or perceive justice in the workings of God's world.

Our analysis of the passages from *Menahot* and *Berakhot* cannot describe “rabbinic thought” in any general or essential manner, any more than any of the individual traditions contained in these passages can. Some of the Sages may have believed literally that all suffering was caused by (and curative of) sin. Certainly this view is the norm in anthologies of midrash earlier than the Talmud, like *Sifre Deuteronomy*³⁹ and *Genesis Rabbah*.⁴⁰ *Tanna debe Eliyahu*, though it answers the question of God’s justice more inconclusively, still suggests that God’s justice is not limited, but only our ability to understand it.⁴¹ These texts use literary elements, later incorporated into our passages, to tell a story that affirms God’s justice, a classical theodicy. But their resonance in the *Bavli* only underlines the impossibility of a full-blown theodicy after the story in *Menahot* has crystallized as an acceptable (anti-)response. No theodicy or theology can overturn the power of this story; no resistance can undermine it. Resistance can only express the wish that the world were otherwise. *Menahot*, though it tells a story that can almost not be faced, also cannot be avoided.

What do we make of the rabbis’ insistence on searching for sins to explain punishment, if we do not read this insistence as a formal statement of theodicy? I believe the answer lies in Emmanuel Levinas’ statement that “[t]o be free is to have time to forestall one’s own abdication under the threat of violence.” Whatever the extent to which different rabbis believed in what we call “rabbinic theodicy,” it was first and most importantly a way of forestalling their abdication to violence, of holding onto human freedom and meaning, in the face of terror, specifically, the terror of the Roman persecutions which defined Judaism in Rabbi Akiva’s lifetime and after. This is the significance of a story found in the early midrash *Mekhilta*, in which R. Shim’on, having found a minor sin he could own up to that would explain his execution, said to R. Yishma’el, “My master, you have comforted me.”⁴² Theodicy was a tool that allowed people to continue to face God while facing⁴³ a terrifying reality.

Can we draw any broader conclusions from this encounter? For one thing, I believe reading rabbinic literature with a deconstructive eye is essential for avoiding the pitfalls that come from

interpreting rabbinic texts theologically. I also believe it leads to a deeper realization of the humanistic content of these texts. To me, this realization seems almost immanent once we have separated ourselves from our own theological biases. This is not to say that rabbinic theodicies never express theological claims. But the drive to read these texts as theology can sometimes mask the human reality within them. Stripped of this mask, we can face the deep resonance between our interpretation of the texts and our relation to the world. Though the meaning we are left with is not an easy one, it is a meaning that cannot be erased by the shortcomings of the text, or the shortcomings of the world we live in.

7. Appendix: Exodus 33.11–34:30 and *Berakhot 7a*
(text in bold is referred to above)

שמות לג.יא–לד.ל

לג יא ודבר יהוה אל-משה פנים אל-פנים כאשר ידבר איש אל-רעהו; ושב אל-המחנה ומשכנתו והושע בן-נון נער לא ימיש מתוך האהל.

יב ויאמר משה אל-יהוה, ראה אתה אמר אלי העל את-העם הזה, ואתה לא הודעתני את אשר-תשלח עמי; ואתה אמרת ידעתיה בשם וגם-מצאת חן בעיני. יג ועתה אם-נא מצאתי חן בעיניך הודעני נא את-דרכך, ואדעך למען אמצא-חן בעיניך וראה כי עמך הגוי הזה. יד ויאמר, פני ילכו והנחתי לך. טו ויאמר אליו: אם-אין פניך הלכים אל-תעלנו מזה. טז ובמה ינדע אפוא כי-מצאתי חן בעיניך, אני ועמך--הלוא בלכתך עמנו ונפלינו, אני ועמך, מכל-העם אשר על-פני האדמה.

יז ויאמר יהוה אל-משה, גם את-הדבר הזה אשר דברת אעשה פי-מצאת חן בעיני, ואדעך בשם. יח ויאמר, הראני נא את-כבודך. יט ויאמר, אני אעביר כל-טובי על-פניך וקראתי בשם יהוה לפניך; וחנתי את-אשר אחו, ורחמתי את-אשר ארחם. כ ויאמר, לא תוכל לראות את-פני, כי לא-יראני האדם וחי. כא ויאמר יהוה, הנה מקום אתי ונצבת, על-הצור. כב והנה בעבר כבדי ושמתיה בנקרת הצור ושכתי כפי עליך עד-עברי. כג והסרתי את-כפי, וראית את-אחורי; ופני לא יראו.

לד א ויאמר יהוה אל-משה, פסל-לך שני-לחת אבנים פראשנים וכתבתי על-הלחת את-הדברים אשר היו על-הלחת הראשנים אשר שפרת. ב והיה נכון לבקר ועלית בבקר אל-הר סיני, ונצבת לי שם על-ראש ההר. ג ואיש לא-יעלה עמך וגם-איש אל-ירא בכל-ההר; גם-הצאן והבקר אל-ירעו אל-מול ההר ההוא. ד ויפסל שני-לחת אבנים פראשנים, וישפם משה בבקר ויעל אל-הר סיני כאשר צוה יהוה אתו וישח בגדו שני לחת אבנים. ה ויכרד יהוה בענו וייתצב עמו שם ויקרא בשם יהוה. ו ויעבר יהוה על-פניו ויקרא, יהוה יהוה אל רחום וחנון--ארח אפים ורב-חסד ואמת. ז נצר חסד לאלפים נשא עון ופסע וחסטה; ונקה לא ינקה--פקד עון אבות על-בנים ועל-בני בנים על-שלישים ועל-רבעים. ח וימהר משה ויקד ארצה, וישתחו...

כח ויהי-שם עם-יהוה ארבעים יום וארבעים לילה--לקחם לא אכל ומים לא שתה; ויכתב על-הלחת את דברי הברית--עשרת הדברים. כט ויהי ברדת משה מהר סיני ושני לחת העדת ביד-משה ברדתו מן-ההר; ומשה לא-נדע כי קרן עור פניו בדרו אתו. ל וירא אהרן וכל-בני ישראל את-משה והנה קרן עור פניו; וייראו מגשת אליו.

ברכות ז"א

א"ר יוחנן משום ר' יוסי מנין שהקב"ה מתפלל?

שנאמר (ישעיהו נו) "והביאותים אל הר קדשי ושמתים בבית תפלתי" —

"תפלתם" לא נאמר, אלא "תפלתי".

מכאן שהקב"ה מתפלל.

מאי מצלי?

אמר רב זוטרא בר טוביה אמר רב:

יה"ר מלפני שיכבשו רחמי את כעסי ויגולו רחמי על מדותי
ואתנהג עם בני במדת רחמים ואכנס להם לפני משורת הדין.
תניא א"ר ישמעאל בן אלישע: פעם אחת נכנסתי להקטיר קטורת לפני ולפנים
וראיתי אכתריאל יה ה' צבאות שהוא יושב על כסא רם ונשא.
ואמר לי: ישמעאל בני ברכני.
אמרתי לו: יה"ר מלפניך שיכבשו רחמיך את כעסך ויגולו רחמיך על מדותיך,
ותתנהג עם בניך במדת הרחמים ותכנס להם לפני משורת הדין,
ונענע לי בראשו.

וקמ"ל שלא תהא ברכת הדיוט קלה בעיניך:

וא"ר יוחנן משום ר' יוסי מנין שאין מרצין לו לאדם בשעת כעסו?

דכתיב (שמות לג) פני ילכו והנחותי לך —

אמר לו הקב"ה למשה:

המתן לי עד שיעברו פנים של זעם ואניח לך.

ומי איכא רתחא קמיה דקודשא בריך הוא?

אין, דתניא (תהילים ז) ואל זועם בכל יום.

וכמה זעמו? רגע. וכמה רגע?

**אחד מחמשת רבוא ושמונת אלפים ושמונה מאות ושמונים ושמונה בשעה,
וזו היא רגע.**

ואין כל בריה יכולה לכיין אותה שעה חוץ מבלעם הרשע

דכתיב ביה (במדבר כד) ויודע דעת עליון.

השתא דעת בהמתו לא הוה ידע, דעת עליון הוה ידע?

אלא מלמד שהיה יודע לכיין אותה שעה שהקב"ה כועס בה.

והיינו דאמר להו נביא לישראל (מיכה ו) עמי זכר נא מה יעץ בלק מלך מואב וגו'.

מאי (מיכה ו) למען דעת צדקות ה'?

א"ר אלעזר: אמר להם הקב"ה לישראל:

דעו כמה צדקות עשיתי עמכם, שלא כעסתי בימי בלעם הרשע,

שאלמלי כעסתי לא נשתייר משונאיהם של ישראל שריד ופליט.

והיינו דקא"ל בלעם לבלק, (במדבר כג) מה אקב לא קבה אל ומה אזעם לא זעם ה'

מלמד שכל אותן הימים לא זעם.

וכמה זעמו? רגע. וכמה רגע?

א"ר אבין ואיתימא רבי אבינא רגע כמימריה.

ומנא לן דרגע רתח? שנא' (תהילים ל) כי רגע באפו חיים ברצונו;

ואב"א מהכא (ישעיהו כו) חבי כמעט רגע עד יעבור זעם.

ואימת רתח?

אמר אביי: בהגך תלת שעו קמייתא כי חיורא כרבלתא דתרנגולא

וקאי אחד כרעא כל שעתא ושעתא

נמי קאי הכי כל שעתא אית ביה שורייקי סומקי

בההיא שעתא לית ביה שורייקי סומקי.

ההוא <צדוקי> {מינא} דהוה בשבבותיה

דר' יהושע בן לוי הוה קא מצער ליה טובא בקראי.

יומא חד שקל תרנגולא ואוקמיה בין כרעי' דערסא ועיין ביה.

סבר כי מטא ההיא שעתא אלטייה. כי מטא ההיא שעתא ניים.

אמר: ש"מ לאו אורח ארעא למעבד הכי —

(תהילים קמה) ורחמיו על כל מעשיו כתיב וכתוב (משלי יז) גם ענוש לצדיק לא טוב.

תנא משמיה דר' מאיר: בשעה שהחמה זורחת,

וכל מלכי מזרח ומערב מניחים כתריהם בראשיהם ומשתחויים לחמה

מיד כועס הקב"ה:

וא"ר יוחנן משום רבי יוסי: טובה מרדות אחת בלבו של אדם יותר מכמה מלקיות, שנאמ': (הושע ב) ורדפה את מאהביה וגו' ואמרה אלכה ואשובה אל אישי הראשון כי טוב לי אז מעתה וריש לקיש אמר: יותר ממאה מלקיות, שנאמר (משלי יז) תחת גערה במבין מהכות כסיל מאה:

וא"ר יוחנן משום ר' יוסי שלשה דברים בקש משה מלפני הקב"ה ונתן לו בקש שתשרה שכינה על ישראל ונתן לו שנאמר (שמות לג) הלוא בלכתך עמנו בקש שלא תשרה שכינה על <עובדי כוכבים> {אומות העולם} ונתן לו שנאמר (שמות לג) ונפלינו אני ועמך בקש להודיעו דרכיו של הקב"ה ונתן לו שנא' (שמות לג) הודיעני נא את דרכיך. אמר לפניו: רבש"ע מפני מה יש צדיק וטוב לו ויש צדיק ורע לו, יש רשע וטוב לו ויש רשע ורע לו? אמר לו: משה, צדיק וטוב לו צדיק בן צדיק; צדיק ורע לו צדיק בן רשע. רשע וטוב לו רשע בן צדיק; רשע ורע לו רשע בן רשע:

אמר מר: צדיק וטוב לו צדיק בן צדיק; צדיק ורע לו צדיק בן רשע. איני? והא כתיב: (שמות לד) "פקד עון אבות על בנים" וקתיב: (דברים כד) "ובנים לא יומתו על אבות" ורמינן קראי אהדדי ומשנינן לא קשיא. הא כשאוחזין מעשה אבותיהם בידיהם, הא כשאין אוחזין מעשה אבותיהם בידיהם. אלא הכי קא"ל: צדיק וטוב לו צדיק גמור; צדיק ורע לו צדיק שאינו גמור. רשע וטוב לו רשע שאינו גמור, רשע ורע לו רשע גמור. ופליגא דר' מאיר, דא"ר מאיר: שתיים נתנו לו ואחת לא נתנו לו — שנא': (שמות לג) "וחנתי את אשר אחון" — אע"פ שאינו הגון, "ורחמתי את אשר ארחם" — אע"פ שאינו הגון.

(שמות לג) "ויאמר לא תוכל לראות את פני" תנא משמיה דר' יהושע בן קרחה: כך א"ל הקב"ה למשה: כשרציתי לא רצית; עכשיו שאתה רוצה, איני רוצה. ופליגא דר' שמואל בר נחמני א"ר יונתן, דא"ר שמואל בר נחמני א"ר יונתן: בשכר שלש זכה לשלש: בשכר (שמות לד) "ויסתר משה פניו" זכה לקלסתר פנים; בשכר "כי ירא" זכה (שמות ג) ל"וייראו מגשת אליו"; בשכר "מהביט" זכה (במדבר יב) ל"ותמונת ה' יביט":

(שמות לג) והסירתי את כפי וראית את אחרי — אמר רב חנא בר ביזנא א"ר שמעון חסידא: מלמד שהראה הקב"ה למשה קשר של תפילין:

וא"ר יוחנן משום ר' יוסי: כל דבור ודבור שיצא מפי הקב"ה לטובה, אפי' על תנאי, לא חזר בו. מנא לן? ממשנה רבינו, שנא' (דברים ט) "הרף ממני ואשמידם וגו' ואעשה אותך לגוי עצום" — אע"ג דבעא משה רחמי עלה דמלתא ובטלה, אפ"ה אוקמה בזרעיה, שנא' (דברי הימים א כג) "בני משה גרשום ואליעזר ויהיו בני אליעזר רחביה הראש וגו' ובני רחביה רבו למעלה וגו' " ותני רב יוסף: למעלה מששים רבוא אתיא רביה רביה כתיב הכא "רבו למעלה" וקתיב התם (שמות א) "ובני ישראל פרו וישרצו וירבוכו".

- 1 This article was first delivered as a paper at the Association for Jewish Studies in 1993.
- 2 The term “theodicy” is used here in the more technical sense of a philosophical or theological *explanation* of the problem of evil, not “the problem of evil” itself, which is the more colloquial meaning one finds in much of the literature cited here.
- 3 According to *Pes. 22b*, “R. Nehemiah Ha’amsuni...would *drash* (interpret) all of the *etim* (Hebrew’s direct object markers) in the Torah. When he reached “*Et YHVH Elohekha tira // YHVH your God you will fear*” (Deut. 6.13) he stopped. His students said to him, ‘Rabbi, what about all the *etim* you [already] *drashed*? He said to them, ‘Just as I received reward for *d’rishah* (interpretation), so do I receive reward for *p’rishah* (withholding from interpretation).’ Until R. Akiva came and *drashed* ‘*et YHVH Elohekha*’ to include the Sages.” The implication of Nehemiah’s statement is that there would be punishment for interpreting the last *et*. In light of such traditions about R. Akiva, and in particular the story of his death quoted below from *b.Berakhot* 61b, Daniel Boyarin states that, “R. Akiva is represented in the tradition as having died a martyr owing to his way of reading.” (*Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990], p. 128)
- 4 Such questions are dealt with adequately by many others. See n. 6. We will however turn briefly to those questions in the conclusion.
- 5 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (trans. Alphonso Lingis; Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 212.
- 6 On the theology of the law, see Laurence Edwards, ‘Rabbi Akiva’s Crowns: Postmodern Discourse and the Cost of Rabbinic Reading,’ *Judaism* 49:4 (2000), pp. 417-435 (419-422); Nachman Levine, ‘Reading Crowned Letters and Semiotic Silences in Menahot 29b,’ *Journal of Jewish Studies* 53:1 (2002), pp. 35-48 (41-46); Michal Rosenberg, ‘Letters and Crowns: The Learning of Moshe and the Learning of R. Akiva’ (Hebr.), in *Al Pi Habe’er: Mehkarim B’hagot Y’hudit Uv’mahshevet Hahalakhah Mogshim L’Ya’akov Blidstein* (eds. Uri Erlich et. al.; Beersheva: Ben Gurion University Press, 2008), pp. 529-564 (541-544, 548-552); Joshua Kullock, ‘On Heirs and Pioneers,’ (JDC Europe, 2010), <<http://www.morim.org/contents.aspx?id=3870>>, retrieved March 31, 2011. On martyrology, see Ra’anan S. Boustan, *From Martyr to Mystic: Rabbinic Martyrology and the Making of Merkavah Mysticism* (Tubingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2005), pp. 69-71, and see also 60-69; Edwards, ‘Rabbi Akiva’s Crowns,’ pp. 426-430. On theodicy, see Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, ‘Theodicy and Torah,’ in *Stories of the Babylonian Talmud* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), pp. 182-202; see also his brief treatment of *Men. 29b* in *Rabbinic Stories* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 2002), pp. 215-217, also pp. 218-228; Menahem Fisch, *Rational Rabbis: Science and Talmudic Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 192-195; Rosenberg, ‘Letters and Crowns,’ pp. 556-567; Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), pp. 165-166. Other treatments may be found in Haim Schwarzbaum, ‘The Jewish and Moslem Versions of Some Theodicy Legends,’ *Fabula* 3 (1959), pp. 119-169 (142-148); Jacob Neusner, ‘Theodicy in Classical Judaism,’ in *The Encyclopaedia of Judaism* (eds. Jacob Neusner et al.; Leiden: Brill, 2006), Brill Online, <<http://www.brillonline.nl/public/theodicy>>, retrieved March 31, 2011; Alon Goshen-Gottstein, ‘Speech, Silence, Song: Epistemology and Theodicy in a Teaching of R. Nahman of Breslav,’ *Philosophia* 30:1-4, pp. 143-187 (viewed online, pagination unavailable). On Schwarzbaum, see Brannon M. Wheeler’s brief critique, ‘The Jewish Origins of Qur An 18:65-82? Reexamining Arent Jan Wensick’s Theory,’ *The Journal of the American Oriental Society* (April-June 1998), pp. 153-171 (157).

Wheeler notes the irony of our text, as do Edwards and Rosenberg. Several others (including Levine, Rosenberg, and esp. Rubenstein, *Stories of*, pp. 187-188) emphasize the paradoxical nature of Moshe not understanding what Akiva has taught in his name. Boyarin characterizes our story as “apophatic theodicy” (p. 166, and see Rubenstein’s commentary, *Stories of*, p. 287). Rubenstein’s reading comes closest to my own. It is worth noting that the the seeming paradox of Akiva teaching in Moshe’s name what Moshe himself cannot understand is actually “solved,” in an ironic manner, by the fact that Moshe hears this very teaching, which Akiva is elaborating, while Moshe is receiving Torah – so that, within the framework of our story, it was *actually* given on Sinai.

- 7 Levine, ‘Reading Menahot 29b’ and Rubenstein, *Stories of*, also do extensive literary analysis on the structure, sounds etc. of our story. Yonah Fraenkel, ‘Hermeneutical Problems in the Study of Aggadic Narrative’ (Hebr.) *Tarbiz* 37:3-4 (139-172), provides the foundation for both.
- 8 I picture God’s back to Moshe, though the *aggadah* is not specific about this. At the very least Moshe’s back is to God much of the time. Certainly this is story is in tension with Exod. 33.11, where God is described talking to Moshe “face-to-face.”
- 9 This contrasts sharply with another *aggadah* which begins with the same image. Moshe ascends to find the Holy One tying crowns (but not sitting, as in our *aggadah*). Here, God asks Moshe questions: “Moshe, is there no [greeting of] Peace in your city?”—i.e., “Why are you dumbfounded? You should greet me!” (*Shab. 89a*), discussed in Fraenkel, ‘Hermeneutical Problems’, p. 163, and Rubenstein, *Stories of*, p. 199-200. In *b.Shabbat*, God is essentially demanding that Moshe treat him as a friend would, rather than as a servant; here there are no lethal consequences. It also contrasts with another *aggadah* (*Sanh. 111a-b*), where Moshe finds God “sitting and writing ‘long patient / slow to anger / *erekh apayim*’” (discussed in Rubenstein, *Stories of*, pp. 200-201), which focuses on God’s mercy to the wicked (in this case, the Israelites after the golden calf). One might say, this was Torah before the golden calf, while *Menahot* represents the

Torah *after* the golden calf (see n. 31 below).

- 10 The verb מעכב, “hold back on” or “hinder” also means to hold back as in a defect that hinders a ritual act from being valid, i.e., holds it back from counting, or that hinders a ritual object from being usable. Edwards notes the frequent use of this term in *Menahot* preceding and following our story. (‘Rabbi Akiva’s Crowns,’ pp. 424-426) He reads the use of the term here (p. 426), to be “suggest[ing] that, if Akiva is an invalid reader, Moshe too is invalidated.” Moshe does not ask a different question: how can it be that Your work is unfinished? For indeed, God could have finished tying the crowns for Akiva before Moshe arrived. Fraenkel does ask this question however (*Sipur Ha-aggadah: Ahdut shel Tokhen v’Tzurah* [Tel Aviv: Hakibutz Hameuhad, 2001], p. 42-44, cited in Rosenberg, ‘Letters and Crowns,’ p. 541). He suggests that God is setting up Moshe in order to see how he will respond. Rosenberg, however, sees in the fact that God is, in the present tense, tying crowns, a reflection of the idea that the elaboration of Torah is infinite, always ongoing. See also below, n. 31, on the interpretation that Moshe is receiving Torah for the second time.
 - 11 Rubenstein. *Stories of*, p. 184, notes that this may be the only story in rabbinic literature (excepting stories involving the prophet Eliyahu) that brings together a biblical figure and a sage, mythic and historical time, in a unified narrative. See also Rosenberg, ‘Letters and Crowns,’ p. 536.
 - 12 Levine notes the repetition of the root for sitting: “the Holy One who is sitting,”: “he went and sat,” and “his mind was settled.” (‘Reading Menachot 29b,’ pp. 38-39) Levine also comments on many other rhetorical and semiotic features of our story, which are all beyond the scope of this article. Rosenberg, ‘Letters and Crowns,’ p. 548, interprets this scene quite differently than others: According to him, Moshe is alarmed by the fact that Akiva is presenting this alien teaching as Torah.
 - 13 The most well-known of these stories, *Ber.* 61b, has Akiva reciting the *Sh’ma* prayer as the Romans begin to rip off his flesh with iron combs. In the story, his students ask him, “Rabbi, even to this point?” He replies, “All my days I was troubled by the verse, “[And you will love YHVH your God ...] with your whole soul”—even if He takes your soul. I said, when would I be able to uphold this? Now that I am able, shall I not uphold it?” Significantly, the angels in this story, upon witnessing Akiva’s death, also exclaim, “This is Torah and this is her reward?!”—to which God responds, “Happy are you R. Akiva, that you are summoned to the life of the coming world!” Thus the story maintains a traditional rabbinic theodicy that the righteous suffer in order to receive reward in the hereafter. Concerning this passage, Boustan writes (*From Martyr to Mystic*, p. 70), “Clearly uncomfortable with [the] agnostic conclusion [of *Men.* 29b], the version of Akiva’s execution found elsewhere in [*Ber.* 61b] sought to domesticate this challenge to the coherence of the cosmic order by juxtaposing it with an affirmation of God’s justice.” (Boustan does not point out that *Ber.* 61b also presents Akiva’s actual martyrdom as a moment of supreme, unparalleled transcendence—another kind of reward, greater in some sense than the world-to-come.) However, there is no reason to assume that *Ber.* 61b is written later than or in response to our *aggadah*, especially since the question “this is Torah and this is her reward?” appears in earlier rabbinic works. Rubenstein, *Stories of*, p. 198, even suggests that the authors of our story “borrowed [the question] directly from bBer 61b...thereby turning a reassuring theology into a conundrum.”
- There is one tradition that comes a bit closer to the perspective of *Menahot*, though without the nihilism found there. In *Semahot* 5 (quoted in Ephraim Urbach, ‘Askesis and Suffering in the Torah of the Sages’ [Hebr.], in *Sefer Yovel L’yitzhaq Be’er*; eds. S. Ettinger et. al. [Jerusalem: Israeli Historical Society, 5721] pp. 48-68 [61]), it says, “R. Akiva was not killed except to be a sign/*mofet*.” Unlike other traditions about R. Akiva, this one ascribes no benefit from R. Akiva’s death for R. Akiva himself, but unlike *Menahot*, it still suggests that his death had some kind of semiotic or prophetic value for his generation.
- 14 What Levinas teaches is what is denied to Moshe: “The will, on the way to death but a death ever future, exposed to death but not immediately, has time to be for the Other, and thus to recover meaning despite death.” (*Totality*, p. 236)
 - 15 One might say that this is in painful contrast to Levinas’ notion of the infinite: “The infinite paralyzes power by its infinite resistance to murder, which...gleams in the face of the Other...in the nudity of the absolute openness of the Transcendent.” (*Totality*, p. 99) This is not the place to examine the absolute centrality of the metaphor of “the face” in Levinas, though it should be duly noted.
 - 16 “Divine violence...is the sign and seal but never the means of sacred execution,” Walter Benjamin, ‘Critique of Violence,’ in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings* (trans. Edmund Jephcott; New York: Schocken Books, 1978), pp. 277-300 (300).
 - 17 This reading seems the only realistic one. Other readers however do find positive theological elements here. Edwards, pp. 431-2, for example, says that even though “Moses...is helpless to change the course of history,” he nevertheless is “turned ‘toward its (Scripture’s) future, not toward its past.’...The talmudic sages resist what some might consider the darker side of Foucault’s argument, that war is a more important point of reference than language. The rabbis know battle, but they also have faith in language.” Neusner, more inexplicably, derives this message from our text, which he considers the “sages [*sic*] last word”:

God rules, and people, in the end, cannot explain, account for the rationality of, everything God decrees. Sages offer more than reasonable explanations for the perceived violation of justice. They offer also the gift of humility in the form of *is [sic]* silence. That forms the barrier before the ultimate terror—not understanding, not making sense of things.

Accordingly, sages placed humility before God above even the entire theological enterprise with its promise of explanation, understanding, and justification. But the last word must register: that God's decrees, however inexplicable those decrees to the human mind, bear the comforting message that God cares.

- 18 Edwards translates *kotz* as “tittle” (‘Rabbi Akiva’s Crowns,’ p. 418); other translations include “ornament” (Levine, ‘Reading Menachot 29b’), “tips” (Rubenstein, *Stories of*) and “point of the crowns” (Neusner). The literal meaning of *kotz* is not addressed in any of the literature, probably because the term is already so normalized, as in the expression “*kotzo shel yod*,” discussed on *Men.* 29a and 34a (specifically, that the lack of the *kotz* on the letter *yod* would *m’akev tefilin*—make them invalid). Though Rosenberg does at length contrast the “celestial Torah and her crowns” with “the earthly Torah and her *kotzim*,” she is primarily interested in the generic idea of a physical image in contrast with the spiritual one. Rosenberg notes that the term *oktzim* עוקצים, spikes or spines (like the stinger on a bee) can also be found (‘Letters and Crowns,’ p. 545). See Rosenberg’s further discussion of *kotz* and *keter* (p. 545ff), including where she connects *taga* (crown) with *keter*; in contrast to *tag* (a variant also meaning crown), which she connects with *kotz*. Rosenberg also suggests (pp. 539 and 547) that no one besides R. Akiva was able to look at the earthly *kotzim* and see the celestial crowns. Even Moshe is only able to see the crowns when he is in the celestial realm.
- 19 The litany of the thirteen attributes continues: “...long patient and abounding [in] love and truth, storing up love for thousands [of generations], bearing wrong and transgression and sin, and erasing [them]...” But here the rabbis cut off the verses in the liturgy, forgoing the end of the revelation, in which God declares that He will not erase sin but will bring punishment on children for their fathers’s sins to the third and fourth generation. This of course is one of the important theodicies justifying why righteous people may suffer evil—because their fathers were not righteous—given in the *Berakhot* passage examined below.
- 20 Rubenstein, *Stories of*, pp. 190-194, and Fisch, *Rational Rabbis*, pp. 192-195, also draw parallels between these Exodus verses and *Men.* 29b. Rubenstein in particular draws out some of the parallels between phrases mentioned here; he also connects *Men.* 29b with *Ber.* 7a, for similar reasons to what we articulate here.
- 21 The distortion or unraveling of time that characterizes this *aggadah* is explored in Fraenkel (‘Hermeneutical Problems,’ pp. 167-168), Rubenstein (*Stories of*, pp. 188-189) and Levine (‘Reading Menachot 29b,’ pp. 39-40). This is one of the most important dimensions of our story, and it is an essential part of its rejection of theodicy. Much of traditional rabbinic theodicy is predicated on realms of time that can be ordered and placed in hierarchies in relation to God: *olam hazeh* (this world) and *olam haba* (the coming world or world-to-come), *hayyei sha’ah* (momentary life) and *hayyei olam* (eternal life); conversely, all the world-to-come is seen as inferior to one hour of *t’shuvah* (returning/repentance) in this world (see e.g. in n. 13). In *Men.* 29b, these hierarchies are flattened out or simply non-existent. We have alluded to this aspect several times above (see also the following note), though it is beyond the scope of this article to do a more detailed analysis.
- 22 Levinas writes, again about time, “To be free is to have time to forestall one’s own abdication under the threat of violence.” (*Totality*, p. 237) “To have time,” or as he writes above, “to have time to be for the Other” is exactly what is missing in the phantasmagorical world that Moshe encounters.
- 23 Rubenstein, p. 194, characterizes the relationship between our texts as such: “The biblical passage represents the climax of the revelatory experience...That the rabbis (in *Ber.* 7a, see next section) translate Moses’s request into a desire to comprehend theodicy suggests that this was...the climax of the revelatory experience. In the [*Menahot*] story, then, Moses is not asking about one of the many theological issues that might have concerned the rabbis; rather he is asking about the most critical and confounding question that comes closest at getting at the divine mind. And, that he gets no answer in the rabbinic version—he at least sees God’s back in the Bible...—to me indicates a deep frustration over understanding theodicy.”
- 24 “...and [that] My mercies will be revealed over my [other] attributes, and I will conduct myself with My children according to the attribute of mercy, and I will make [My children] enter inside (*lifnim*, another word related to face) the line of the law (show mercy to them beyond the letter of the law).”
- 25 Though the repetition each day of God’s rage is imagined here as a kind of law of nature, in the section about Bil’am not quoted, God says to Israel, “Know how many acts of charity (righteous acts) I did with you, that I did not become angry in the days of Bil’am the wicked, for if I did there wouldn’t remain a remnant or escapee of Israel.” This is the meaning, according to R. El’azar, of Bil’am’s declaration (Num. 23:8), “How will I rage [against Israel] when YHVH did not rage?” If so, then God’s rage is represented as a choice, though for God not to become enraged is also presented here as a miracle of the highest order. In a way, this is an even more dangerous picture of God. (Note that rabbinic texts, when describing calamities that might befall all of Israel, characteristically use the euphemism “haters of Israel” out of anxiety that their words themselves could bring on such calamities.)
- 26 Surprisingly, here the Talmud does not introduce two theodicies common to rabbinic literature: 1) that the righteous suffer even for minor sins (either because God judges the righteous more severely, or because God is preparing them for the next world by cleansing them in this world), and 2) that the righteous suffer in this world in order to increase their reward in the next. However, one of the answers the Talmud gives (before tearing them all down) may in fact be equivalent to the first theodicy, that is, an incomplete *tzadik* would be a *tzadik* who had some sins that needed reparation.

Closely allied with the second theodicy is the rabbinic idea of *isurin shel ahavah*, “sufferings of love,” which can be given as an interpretation of sickness or pain but never of death, since the hallmark of such sufferings is that the one who bears them is not held back from studying Torah. (*Ber.* 5a-b)

- 27 This type of rhetorical criticism is exemplified by David Kraemer in *The Mind of the Talmud: An Intellectual History of the Bavli* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). Kraemer gives an admirably brief summary of his methodology in *Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 151-152.
- 28 Rubenstein, *Stories of*, p. 193, states, “This response clearly has a great deal in common with our story’s perspective...” Concerning R. Meir’s interpretation, Kraemer states, p. 165, that “once it is expressed here, [this admission] generates no discussion. It is an alternative that the present author has no interest in pursuing. So, despite the eloquence of the question, this text in no way stands out in the *Bavli*.” We would claim that this statement, because of its place in the rhetorical structure of *Ber. 7a*, does in fact stand out quite strongly, according to Kraemer’s own criteria and methods. Note by way of contrast that in ‘*Midrash Chaserot Viterot*,’ *Batey Midrashot* (ed. S. A. Wertheimer; Jerusalem: K’tav Yad V’sofer, 5749), p. 255-6, §82, the same response is recorded as a real answer to Moshe’s question, rather than as a refusal to answer. That passage continues: “When the Holy One gives wealth to a person, if he is decent *hagun* then it continues with him and his children, and if not... ‘Don’t fear when a man is made wealthy...for in his death he will not take all’ (Psalms 49.17-18).” This would answer the question of *rasha v’rov lo* (the good he receives is only temporary), but not the question of *tzadik v’ra lo*. However, unlike in *Berakhot*, the answer given in the midrash is left standing and seemingly accepted.
- 29 It is also possible to read R. Y’hoshua ben Korhah’s teaching as an independent unit that is speaking not about *tzadik v’ra lo* but more generally about Moshe’s desire to see God, as the plain meaning of the verses suggests. It would then be grouped more accurately with R. Shmuel bar Nahmani’s teaching, as one of two cases where the Talmud completely turns away from the question of *tzadik v’ra lo*. But the *stam* of the Talmud has taken care to position Y’hoshua’s teaching so that it does read as a refusal of *tzadik v’ra lo*. In either reading, the goal of the Talmudic author is clear.
- 30 Moreover, what Moshe receives is neither something he asks for, nor something he desires.
- 31 Fisch notes that if this *aggadah* is a comment on the verses from Exodus 33, then it corresponds to the second giving of the commandments, in which case Moshe would have already accepted the Torah once. This of course sharpens Moshe’s question, “Who holds back Your hand?”—i.e., why should the Torah be revised after it was already given? And this raises the possibility that this new Torah, with its crowns that can become a vessel for Akiva’s insights, destines its interpreters to a different fate than the first Torah. Since the second Torah is essentially an expression of God’s mercy and God’s willingness to establish the covenant despite the sin of the golden calf, it also opens up the possibility that this willingness is far from complete, tinged with vengeance towards the class of people who stubbornly insist on making the Torah their own.
- 32 *Tefilin* are the black leather boxes that contain scrolls that Jews wrap around their heads and arms while praying. The head *tefilin* box is held by two straps that form a knot in back at the base of the skull. This *aggadah* therefore assumes that God is wearing *tefilin*, which Moshe sees when he sees God’s back. The head *tefilin* contains four scrolls in which the verses that command one to “bind these words on your hands and make them frontlets between your eyes” appear, while the hand *tefilin* includes all four sections on one scroll. One of these sections includes the verse “And YHVH killed every first-born in the land of Egypt” (Exod. 13.15), which is discussed immediately preceding the story about the crowns in *Menahot*—another knot which ties these passages together. The word in this verse that the Talmud is concerned with is *ויהרג* “And he killed,” specifically: what happens if the *vav* in *vayaharog* is divided in the middle? Edwards (‘*Rabbi Akiva’s Crowns*,’ p. 426) suggests that the defective *vav* would render the meaning of the word, according to his translation, “The Lord is slain.” I think it would rather suggest, “YHVH will kill”—hence pointing directly to R. Akiva’s death at the end of the story.

As an aside, we might also mention here two other interesting elements on *Men. 29b*. Firstly, below our story there is a statement that the crown, *taga* in this case, of the letter *he* indicates that when a person repents/turns/*hozer*, “the Holy One will tie a knot / *kosher lo keshet* (interpreted as crown) for him (i.e. on his head).” Secondly, in an illustration of the crowns on the letters that appears within the commentary on *Men. 29b* in the traditional printing of of the Talmud, the letters look remarkably like daggers (see right).



- 33 Indeed, the previous folio includes a long excursus on God’s *tefilin*, the proof-text that God wears them, and the verses inside of them that praise Israel, noting particularly, “And how do you know that the *tefilin* are strength for Israel? That it is written, ‘And all the peoples of the earth will see that the name of *Hashem* is called upon you, and they will fear you,’ and it is taught: R. Eliezer the Great says: These are the *tefilin* of the head.” This is because the head *tefilin* are *seen*, out in front of one’s face, between one’s eyes—but the knot is what is concealed. Indeed, the knot can be said to indicate the place or time when the nations not only do not fear Israel but kill them, according to God’s predestined intent. What follows this encomium to *tefilin* is a catalog of rewards and punishments for specific deeds (or very slight misdeeds). So one could say that *Ber. 7a* unravels what *Ber. 6a-b* weaves together, coming back to the starting point of the head *tefilin*—or, more precisely, coming round from the box of the *tefilin* in front to the knot in back.

The last line of this excursus actually appears again in *Menahot* (35b), followed immediately by the line from *Ber.*

7a: “And I will remove My palm and you will see My back”—Said R. Chana bar Bizna...: It teaches that the Holy One showed Moshe a *tefilin* knot / *keshet shel t'filin*.” The line is there preceded by the statement “Said R. Y’hudah son of R. Shmuel...in the name of Rav: The knot of the *tefilin* is a *halakhah l’Moshe miSinai*. Said R. Nachman: Their decoration goes outside.” Note that the decorations in the Torah are the crowns knotted to the letters, while according to some interpretations the decorations referred to here are the letters formed by the knots. Even more amazingly, the *Gemara* continues after this statement: “Said R. Y’hudah: The knot of the *tefilin* needs to be high up, so that Israel will be high up and not [cast] down; and it (the *tefilin* box) needs to be forward-facing / *kalpe panim* so that Israel will be *l’panim* / to the face (i.e., in front) **and not l’ahor / to the back**.”

- 34 Why does the *Gemara* choose this verse from Deuteronomy instead of the parallel verse in the original story, Exod. 32:10: “And now let me go // *hanifah li* and My anger will burn with them and I will consume them and I will make you become a great nation.” Perhaps because both the promised destruction (“and I will blot out their name from under the heavens”—which has no equivalent in Exodus) and the promised rebuilding (“I will make you...a powerful and numerous nation, more than them”—as opposed to simply “a great nation”) are greater than in the Exodus version.
- 35 See *Otzar Hamidrashim* (J. Eisenstein; New York: Reznik, 1915), p. 486, for a late restatement of this theodicy, where concerning the *tzadik she’eyno gamor* he says, “they bring upon him evils to purify him and to bring him to the coming world.”
- 36 See e.g. references cited in n. 28.
- 37 Rubenstein, *Stories of*, p. 198, claims direct borrowing from *Ber.* 61b (see above n. 13), which he sees as “a clear sign indicating Stammaitic composition,” so direct influence here is not farfetched.
- 38 *Responses to Suffering*, pp. 154-210, 213-214. Kraemer, p. 209, attributes this openness to questioning (some) traditional answers to “the relative security [the Babylonian Jewish community] enjoyed,” saying that the authors of the *Bavli* “had the luxury of being less defensive, [and hence] more questioning and skeptical.” However, Kraemer does not entirely agree with extending this framework to formal theodicy. He states (p. 213), “Deliberations [in the *Bavli*] which limit their focus to the theoretical question of divine justice are particularly conservative in their approach.” (See also pp. 207-208.) Boustán, *From Martyr to Mystic*, p. 70, writes in a similar vein, “The radical challenge to the economy of sin and punishment implied by [the question ‘This is Torah and this is her reward?'] already belonged to the martyrological tradition of the Palestinian Talmud. Conversely, despite the theological tendencies observed by Elman and Kraemer, the Babylonian Talmud was not averse to making the martyrological tradition conform to the established conception of divine justice that dominates earlier rabbinic sources.” What we have seen, however, is quite the opposite: the *Bavli* actively and radically undermines earlier theodicies. Note that Kraemer himself, on pp. 170-171, makes a very strong case for the idea that *Men.* 29b differs radically from what came before, pointing out that while in the *Yerushalmi*, “*Zu Torah v’zu s’kharah?*” only appears in the mouth of the heretic Elisha ben Abuya, here it appears in the mouth of Moshe himself.
- 39 32:5. The theme of the passage is that through suffering one attains forgiveness.
- 40 55:2. Here various interpretations are given to prove that God “tests the righteous.”
- 41 In *Seder Eliyahu Zuta* ch. 6, Moshe asks God to show him the attribute by which the world is conducted, because “I see *tzadik v’tov lo, tzadik v’ra lo...*” In response, God says, “Moshe, you can’t stand on (understand) My attributes.” God explains “a little of My attributes”: that some people have their sustenance doubled through the merit of prayer even when their actions and their fathers’ actions have no value. Then God shows Moshe the thirteen attributes of mercy. In no way does God approach explaining *tzadik v’ra lo*; on the contrary, the passage multiplies love upon love and mercy upon mercy to the wicked. See also the slightly more pointed text in ‘*Midrash Chaserot Viterot*,’ discussed in n. 28, where a similar half-answer to *tzadik v’ra lo* is given and accepted. Kraemer, p. 213, observes concerning other aggadic passages that the express rejection of doubts may be balanced by “the evident ambivalence in the rhetoric...conveyed through imperfect parables or internal literary contradictions.” That is true here.
- 42 *Mek. Neziqin* 18, following this exchange between R. Yishma’el and R. Shim’on, who are being led to execution:

R. Shim’on said to R. Yishma’el: My master, my heart leaves, because I don’t know why I am being killed. R. Yishma’el said to R. Shim’on: In your days did no person ever come by you for judgment or for a question, and you held him back עכבתו until you sipped your cup or tied your sandal or wrapped yourself in your *talit*? And she (the Torah) said (Exod. 22:21-22), “If you afflict [the widow or orphan...I will hear their cry; and My anger will burn and I will kill you with the sword...” And one [and the same] is great affliction or little affliction. And at this word [R. Shim’on] said: My master, you have comforted me.

R. Shim’on, in this narrative, was not looking for a theological answer, but rather for a way to be at peace in the face of martyrdom. This was how he found freedom, as Levinas has defined it. Note that “holding back” is counted as deadly here, as it is in *Menahot*—but here it is not only rendered meaningful, as the source of punishment it becomes the source of meaning.

- 43 Or remembering; see Kraemer, n. 38.