

CHAPTER 2

Rabbinical Judaism

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Judaism is often conceived in the Western world by general lay opinion as the first highly moralizing religion, which conferred morality to its sister religions: God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses; hence, Judaism was born, whence grew Christianity and Islam. Add to it the popular preconception about the Hebrew Bible's most moralizing God, vengefully and violently enforcing the Law, a picture based on many biblical stories as well as on descriptive verses comparable to these:¹

... for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me. (Exod. 20:5 = Deut. 5:9)

A jealous and avenging God is the Lord; the Lord is avenging and wrathful; the Lord takes vengeance on his adversaries and prolongs it against his enemies. (Nah. 1:2)

O Lord, you God of vengeance, you God of vengeance, shine forth! Rise up, O judge of the earth; give to the proud what they deserve! ... He will repay them for their iniquity, and wipe them out for their wickedness; the Lord our God will wipe them out. (Ps. 94:1–2, 23)

The story is not so simple, however. The Hebrew Bible (Old Testament)² and its ethical system, centered around a divinity with a complex character, are the products of long development (Jokiranta, Part III, Chapter 3, this volume). Rather than focusing on that development, this chapter presents the various subsequent stages that led to Rabbinical Judaism, as we know it nowadays, and the role of moralizing supernatural punishment and reward (MSP) therein.

1 New Revised Standard Version [NRSV], Updated Edition.

2 The term Hebrew Bible is the neutral term used to denote the books contained in the Jewish scriptures (the Tanakh), that is, the Old Testament according to the Protestant canon. In this chapter, the terms Bible and biblical shall always refer – unless otherwise noted – to the Hebrew Bible, excluding the New Testament.

What is Rabbinical Judaism?

The religion(s) of the Israelites in earlier biblical times, which it would be anachronistic to call Judaism, underwent many stages. A critical study of the biblical texts often unveils contradictory views and conflicting positions. Observing these contradictions enables the modern scholar to reconstruct the complex history of the texts and of the religious and ethical systems underlying them. In contrast, observing them has always posed great challenges to theologians of all denominations, who aimed at developing a consistent ethical system – and in line with contemporaneous moral values, at that – that could arguably be derived from the Scriptures.

The term *Jew* (Hebrew *yehudi*, Greek *Ioudaios*, originally meaning “Judean, from the province of Judea”) only slowly acquired the meaning we are familiar with (Boyarin 2019). Following the Babylonian exile (sixth century BCE), a loose spectrum of Yahwistic cults could be observed from Elephantine, in the south of Egypt, through Judea and Samaria to Mesopotamia. We shall use the label *Judaization* to describe the process by which a new ethnic and religious identity gradually emerged in the Persian and Hellenistic periods, in Palestine and in the Diaspora.³ In a parallel development, for most, Jerusalem and its Temple would become the sole center of the cult, except for the Samaritans, who would reject the centrality of Jerusalem (John 4:20) and would preserve, up to this day, a separate Israelite but non-Jewish religion.

Besides the temples, a second focus of these Yahwistic cults in the Persian and Hellenistic periods was a growing body of literature: the Law (i.e., the Torah, or Pentateuch, or the Five Books of Moses), as well as prophetic, poetic, and historical books and more recent pieces of literature. Much later, some of them would be known as “books of the Bible” (depending on the various canons). The many-centuries-long editorial work on the Pentateuch reached its final stage probably in the Persian period, creating a text – still quite fluid – that would serve as the central pillar of both Judaism and Samaritanism. In these communities, this process of *Torahization* (Petersen 2022) would become a key survival strategy after the destruction of their temples by the Romans in 70 CE and by the Hasmonean king John Hyrcanus I around 111 BCE, respectively (Bourgel 2016). Besides the Jewish and Samaritan versions of the Torah, further books acquired varying levels of religious significance, especially in Judaism.

The second major step toward what we know nowadays as Judaism was *rabinization* (McDowell, Naiweld, and Stökl Ben Ezra 2021). Even while construing

3 Karel van der Toorn (2019) describes how the Israelite community in Elephantine acquired a nascent Jewish identity in the fifth century BCE (cf. Van der Toorn 2019: 142 for a summary). At that point, in the Persian period, Samaritans (not yet Samaritans) were still included in the Aramaic term *yēhūdāyē*, the meaning of which had recently shifted from “Judahites” to “Jews.” Van der Toorn also emphasizes that the Elephantine community adopted a Diaspora identity relative to the religious centers and authorities in either Judea or Samaria.

it differently, various heirs of the Israelite tradition – e.g., Samaritans, Qumranites, and Christians – preserved a “temple-like” cult, with priests, altars, and/or (symbolic or real) sacrifices, such as the Eucharist in Christianity and the Passover sacrifice in Samaritanism.⁴ In contrast, following the destruction of the second Jerusalem temple in 70 CE, an originally small and peripheral circle of scholars, known as the rabbis, possibly related to the predestruction faction of the Pharisees (Cohen 1984; Rosen-Zvi 2020), gradually developed a novel form of Judaism. Downplaying the role of the priestly classes (the Kohanim of Aaronic descent and the Levites), associated to a now defunct form of the cult, this new group presented themselves as the true holders of the tradition originating from Mount Sinai (cf. Mishnah Avot 1).

They advanced two innovative assertions: first, that Moses received not only the Ten Commandments at Sinai but the whole Torah, from Genesis 1 to Deuteronomy 34, and second, that Moses also received the Oral Law (*tora she-be-al-pe*, or Oral Torah), a body of instructions and explanations on the Written Law (*tora she-bikhtav*, or Written Torah). An unbroken chain of transmission connected *Moshe rabbenu* (“Moses, our master,” literally, “our rabbi” – observe the rabbinization of the past) to the rabbis of the Roman period. Therefore, they claimed to possess the true interpretation of the Pentateuch, *pace* Samaritans, Christians, Gnostics, latter Karaites, and followers of any other nonrabbinic⁵ forms of Judaism. Moreover, they argued that the whole (written) Torah is divine and perfect as it was composed by God himself, not by Moses – and prior to the creation of the world, as its blueprint, at that.⁶ Therefore, each and every linguistic minutia of the text carries some message – such as details of the Jewish legal system (*halakhah*), especially for those following in the footsteps of the second-century sage Rabbi Akiva, or esoteric information for adherents of the Late Antique and medieval Jewish mysticism (Kabbalah).

After the Hebrew Bible was canonized by the early second century CE, the oral lore of the rabbis formed the basis of rabbinic literature. The latter includes several genres. Targums are Aramaic translations of biblical books. Midrash collections on various books of the Hebrew Bible contain exegetical and homiletic traditions

4 For the role of priests and Levites in Qumran, refer to Balázs Tamási (2022: 109).

5 The word “rabbinic” covers two, less defined terms, referring to (1) Late Antique rabbinic culture (e.g., rabbinic literature, rabbinic circles) and (2) medieval and modern rabbis.

6 Compare, for example, Gen. Rabba 1:1 and 1:4, Lev. Rabba 19:1, Mishnah Avot 3:14, and b Ned 39b on the Torah as a tool for the creation. Note that this theologically correct version has coexisted in Judaism with the traditional and more intuitive narrative about the Torah being dictated by God and written down by Moses during the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. The rabbis in the Babylonian Talmud (B. Bat. 14b–15a) discussed the question of who wrote the last sentences of Deuteronomy about the death of Moses. Did God dictate them to Moses, who noted them down with tears as a prophecy, or was it Joshua, following the death of Moses? However, this question is irrelevant for the theologically correct narrative about God giving the entire Torah to Moses on Sinai. Yet not many seem to have raised theological objections to this famous passage in the Talmud.

organized according to the structure of the biblical text. The Mishnah, compiled by Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi at the beginning of the third century, is a collection of primarily legal traditions organized thematically. A similar collection, the Tosefta, is a “supplementary” collection compiled a few decades later. The Palestinian Talmud and the Babylonian Talmud contain the discussions of subsequent generations of rabbis in Palestine and in Mesopotamia, respectively. The starting point of a discussion is a paragraph of the Mishnah, but then the discourse can move on to other topics, while biblical verses are frequently quoted and analyzed as proof texts. *Halakhah* refers to rabbinic material of legal nature, and *aggadah* to everything else (primarily narratives but also ethics, folklore, science, etc.).

After Torahization and Judaization, followed by rabbinization, the third step toward what can be called “mainstream Rabbinical Judaism” was *Babylonization* (Lavee 2014: 85).⁷ While the literary activity of the rabbinic circles was quite widespread in the Late Antique and early medieval periods, it was the Babylonian Talmud that became the focal point, and even the symbol, of subsequent Judaism (Wimpfheimer 2018: 8, 103–104). In turn, medieval rabbinic literature, taking the Babylonian Talmud as its starting point, culminated in the Shulhan Arukh, the law code of Joseph Caro, in the sixteenth century. While the Karaites rejected rabbinization (or “de-rabbinized” themselves) in the early Middle Ages and the Yemenite Jewry might have been affected somewhat less by Babylonization, it is safe to state that “mainstream Rabbinical Judaism” (since the late medieval and early modern period) is the product of these three stages. Modern developments should be covered in a separate study.

MSP in Torahized Early Judaism

Anders Klostergaard Petersen (2022: 345) argues that different forms of late Second Temple Judaism “filled different niches in the cultural landscape,” which they adapted to or changed considerably. These different forms of Torahized Judaism (and Samaritanism) developed various interpretations of the Torah, which “instantiates ideals of Israelite/Judaic religion to be instilled on the members of the group by setting up a *reward and punishment system* [emphasis added] aimed to enforce the ideals.”

Furthermore, Petersen underscores that the Torah should not be seen as a reflection of the reality in the Second Temple period but rather as a theoretical construction: a “legacy of the fathers” or as “expressing ideals” but not a “constitution and official legal foundation.” Reality, in fact, would be determined by age-old routines, as well as by Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman law and customs. It would take centuries

7 Sacha Stern (2001, 2019) employs the Jewish calendar to show how religious authority moved from the Land of Israel to Babylonia in the last centuries of the first millennium CE.

of legal and exegetical discourse in Rabbinical Judaism and its alternatives to harmonize the text of the Pentateuch – sometimes vague or blurred, sometimes under-determined or impractical, and sometimes even self-contradictory⁸ – with reality, with actual legal and ritual practices.

However, the key moral ideals of the Torah, the prophets, and further books on their way to canonization (remember, no Bible yet!) were already ostensible in prerabbinic Judaism (Early Judaism, Late Second Temple Judaism, or “Common Judaism”). The reward and punishment system enforcing them originated in Deuteronomic theology (see Jokiranta, Part III, Chapter 3, this volume), most clearly appearing in Deuteronomy 11:

So if you faithfully obey the commands I am giving you today – to love the Lord your God and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul – then I will send rain on your land in its season, both autumn and spring rains, so that you may gather in your grain, new wine and olive oil. I will provide grass in the fields for your cattle, and you will eat and be satisfied. Be careful, or you will be enticed to turn away and worship other gods and bow down to them. Then the Lord’s anger will burn against you, and he will shut up the heavens so that it will not rain, and the ground will yield no produce, and you will soon perish from the good land the Lord is giving you. Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates, so that your days and the days of your children may be many in the land the Lord swore to give your ancestors, as many as the days that the heavens are above the earth. (Deut. 11:13–21)⁹

Deuteronomistic history (Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel, and 1–2 Kings) developed a pattern of reward and punishment as an interpretation of the annals of Israel (Collins 2018: 188), culminating in the Babylonian exile, as already foreseen in Deuteronomy 11:17: “Then the Lord’s anger will burn against you, ... and you will soon perish from the good land the Lord is giving you.” Importantly, here the reward only depended on Israel’s faithfulness to their God, and the punishment only ensued from their worshipping other divinities.

8 To give a single example, in the Covenant Code a male slave is released after six years of servitude (Exod. 21:2–11) but not a female slave (Exod. 21:7), whereas the Deuteronomic Code extends this law to female slaves (Deut. 15:12).

9 NRSV, Updated Edition.

Yet in the prophets' messages, the exile would also become a consequence of moral misdeeds, besides infidelity to God. Following are a few examples from various periods, from Hosea, referring to the fall of the Northern Kingdom in the eighth century, to Zechariah, addressing those returning from the Babylonian exile (late sixth century):

The Lord has a charge to bring against Judah; he will punish Jacob according to his ways and repay him according to his deeds. ... But you must return to your God; maintain love and justice, and wait for your God always. The merchant uses dishonest scales and loves to defraud. Ephraim boasts, "I am very rich; I have become wealthy. With all my wealth they will not find in me any iniquity or sin." ... But Ephraim has aroused his bitter anger; his Lord will leave on him the guilt of his bloodshed and will repay him for his contempt. (Hos. 12:2-6, 8-14)

Therefore, my people go into exile for lack of knowledge; their nobles are dying of hunger, and their multitude is parched with thirst. ... But the Lord of hosts is exalted by justice, and the Holy God shows himself holy by righteousness. (Isa. 5:13-16)

Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God? (Mic. 6:7-8)

If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, if you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your ancestors for ever and ever. (Jer. 7:5-7)

The word of the Lord came to Zechariah, saying: "Thus says the Lord of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another. But they refused to listen and turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears in order not to hear. They made their hearts adamant in order not to hear the law and the words that the Lord of hosts had sent by his spirit through the former prophets. Therefore, great wrath came from the Lord of hosts. Just as, when I called, they would not hear, so, when they called, I would not hear, says the Lord of hosts, and I scattered them with a whirlwind

among all the nations that they had not known. Thus, the land they left was desolate, so that no one went to and fro, and a pleasant land was made desolate.” (Zech. 7:8–14)

In turn, by the time of the emergence of Early Judaism, the theology of the Deuteronomist was transformed into a theology of punishment and reward that depended on Israel’s behavior toward God and humans alike. The canon surfacing at the center of religion washed away the differences in the perspectives taken by various biblical authors, homogenizing their worldviews. (Entertaining a single mental theology is conspicuous even today when people refer to “*the Bible saying*” such and such.) Torahization emphasized the Law, of which the Yahwistic cult was only a subfield. Therefore, even if in the original context Israel strayed far from God by following worthless idols (cf. Jer. 2:5), the latter phrase would be put in parentheses or read symbolically, and Israel’s infidelity was now understood as a broader disloyalty to the Torah. Moses’ Law contained both ceremonial and social precepts, and the two sets of commandments (*mitzvot*; sing. *mitzvah*) were considered equally important. At the pinnacle of this transformation, the second-century sage Rabbi Akiva singled out “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18) as the most fundamental principle in the Torah (Sifra Kedoshim 4:12).

Extending the Deuteronomist’s theology, the Babylonian Talmud (b Yoma 9b) suggests that the First Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed because of idol worship, forbidden sexual relations, and bloodshed, proposing creative readings of biblical verses to prove that each of them happened in the last days of the First Temple. Based on the Tosefta (t Menahot 13:4), it continues by conceiving an MSP system concerned with interpersonal behavior:

However, the Second Temple – [in whose days people] were busy with Torah [study], with commandments, and with acts of kindness – why was it destroyed? Because of wanton hatred. [This comes to] teach you that wanton hatred is equivalent to the three [most severe] transgressions [taken together]: idol worship, forbidden sexual relations and bloodshed. (b Yoma 9b)

According to the Jewish tradition, each of the two tablets of the Ten Commandments contained five commandments, the first five pertaining to the relationship “between man and God” (*bein adam le-maqom*), and the last five to the relationship “between man and his fellow” (*bein adam le-havero*) (Greenberg, Rothkoff, and Kadosh 2007). Already, Philo of Alexandria had noted,

And after this commandment relating to the seventh day he gives the fifth, which concerns the honour to be paid to parents, giving it a position on the

confines of the two tables of five commandments each; for being the concluding one of the first table, in which the most sacred duties to the Deity are enjoined, it has also some connection with the second table which comprehends the obligations towards our fellow creatures. (De decalogo 22 [106])

To sum up, social and sacramental laws were considered to be strongly intertwined. The Deuteronomist's system of supernatural punishment and reward, originally focused on the monopoly of a single deity, was applied by the period of Early Judaism to the whole spectrum of Torah law. This spectrum ranged from prosocial behavior and ethics to civil, criminal, and ceremonial legislation. The prophets' voice contrasting cult with God's message (1Sam. 15:22; Jer. 6:19–20) was (and has been) replaced in Judaism by adherence to the Torah law by interweaving ritual and ethical norms. Keep in mind, moreover, that *Torah* does not refer only to the specific words and sentences in the Pentateuch; it is rather "a symbol of divine legislation and moral justice [invoked regularly by people] without knowing the specifics of the commandments themselves" (Wimpfheimer 2018: 3¹⁰).

It was in the context of this revised, moralistic theology that the above paragraph from Deuteronomy 11 made it into Jewish liturgy. It was added to the Shema (Deut. 6:4–9) as its second portion, certainly not later than the second century CE (Mishnah Berakhot 2:2). The Mishnah also relates that all three portions of the Shema had been recited in the Jerusalem Temple, preceded by the Decalogue (m Tamid 5:1), even though the Ten Commandments would not be read outside the Temple service, so that heretics "shall not say that only these [the Ten Commandments] were given to Moses on Mount Sinai" (y Ber 1, 3c; cf. Idelsohn [1932] 1995: 91). While the historical value of the Mishnah, compiled in the early third century CE, for reconstructing the liturgy in the pre-70 CE Jerusalem Temple has long been a matter of debate, it is noteworthy that the Nash papyrus, usually dated as early as the second century BCE, also contained the Decalogue together with (the first portion of) the Shema (Greenberg 2007). The Ten Commandments continued to be recited in some synagogues for more than a millennium, and elsewhere the first two portions of the Shema were interpreted as a paraphrase of the Decalogue (Idelsohn [1932] 1995): 91–2). Many prayer books even today have the Ten Commandments at the end of the morning prayer for private recitation.

Thus emerged a daily ritual: the reading of the three portions of the Shema in the morning and in the evening. It included and later alluded to the Decalogue and

10 Wimpfheimer, in fact, discusses the symbolic use of the Ten Commandments and the American Constitution, contrasting their "symbolic meaning" to their "essential meaning" (literal meaning, original content) and to their "enhanced meaning" (reception). Subsequently, he applies this model to the Babylonian Talmud. I am confident he would not oppose the use of his framework to the various registers of the Torah.

also to all other commandments of God. Thus, the sentence “Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart” (Deut. 6:6; see also Deut. 11:13) was not understood in its contextual sense as referring to Moses’ farewell address before the Israelites crossed the Jordan but as referring to the entire Torah – as if God were speaking on Mount Sinai and not Moses 40 years later. Similarly, the second section of the Shema, Deuteronomy 11:13–21, was recognized as containing rewards and punishments for obeying or disobeying the words of God in general. The ritual usage of the text permitted not paying attention to the words themselves and forgetting their original sense, the Deuteronomic theology. The ritual, instead, reinforced the MSP system for the broad spectrum of Torah law.

Hence, the Shema, a text recited twice each day, ideally in a synagogue, became a prototypical example of a “doctrinal ritual” early on. Conforming to the proposal of Harvey Whitehouse (2021: 125), this standardized ritual probably contributed to group formation, to the emergence of a broad social reality sometimes referred to as Synagogal Judaism or Common Judaism. Here, we enter shaky ground, however. We hardly know anything about the social conditions and the lived religion in nonelitist, nonpartisan Late Antique Judaism, let alone about the mechanisms by which a specific ritual contributed to group formation.

Much has been speculated based on the interpretation of texts and archeological finds, but only few solid data are available. Recent scholarship (for an overview, refer to the helpful articles in McDowell, Naiweld, and Stökl Ben Ezra 2021; Schwartz and Weiss 2012; and the references therein) envisions a loose network of Jewish communities in Palestine, and elsewhere in the Roman Empire and beyond, organized around synagogues but also embedded in the local (non-Jewish) environment, as reflected, for instance, by the Pauline epistles. Before 70 CE, these communities must have maintained some connections with Jerusalem, including occasional pilgrimages to the Temple (depending on one’s economic prosperity, geographic location, and religious conviction) and the sharing of ideas, texts, and practices. At the same time, these communities were also open to non-Jewish ideas and practices, not always keeping the borders of Judaism clear-cut, as best seen by their receptiveness to Christianity as well as by the pagan motifs on Late Antique synagogue mosaics.

The local synagogues – where the liturgy most probably focused on biblical texts – successfully replaced the Jerusalem Temple, with its priests and sacrifices, as the center of religious activities even before 70 CE. Run by the local community, lay people, some of whom might have been wealthier and some of whom might have been more knowledgeable, they were not under the authority of the rabbinic circles, even after 70 CE. Some of these communities were absorbed by Christianity and later by Islam; a handful of them might have formed the basis of Karaism and other Jewish sects in the eighth to tenth century (Bacher 1895); but many of them remained “just plain Jewish.” The rabbinization of these latter communities took

several centuries. As José Costa puts it, “Rabbinization [of Judaism] seems to have consisted essentially in the rabbinization of the synagogues (and in the ‘synagogalization’ of the rabbis)” (McDowell, Naiweld, and Stökl Ben Ezra 2021: 112–113).

Despite the lack of sources, I conjecture that this form of nonrabbinic or pre-rabbinic “Synagogal Judaism” was strongly Judaized and Torahized. Judaization consisted of a (Diaspora) Jewish identity and of some ties to Jerusalem and its Temple, or to the memory thereof. Torahization consisted of a central role for the Pentateuch in their liturgy, and of an MSP system derived therefrom. The system of supernatural punishment and reward promoted certain forms of prosocial and ritual behaviors, and itself was promoted by the liturgy in the synagogue. The fates of the two Jerusalem Temples provided additional proof of the MSP system postulated in this culture.

Case study 1: Rabbinical Judaism as reflected in the Mishnah

The first axiom of Rabbinical Judaism, as explained earlier, is that Moses received the entire written Torah as well as its explanation, the Oral Torah, from God on Mount Sinai. The Pentateuch is the blueprint of creation, not “simply” a human text written under divine inspiration. It must be read, expounded, and implemented literally, that is, letter by letter. Referring to it as a *symbol* of Judaism; using it for ritual, liturgical purposes; cherry-picking certain passages; or reading it allegorically will not suffice. The rabbis opted for a very close reading of the biblical text, but then, they were willing to read the text in creative ways for it to fit their needs.

The rabbis, in this respect the heirs of the Pharisees (Acts 23:6–8), believed in the resurrection of the dead. They posited a *world to come* (*olam ha-ba*): the righteous shall “have a share in the world to come,” whereas the wicked shall not. Note that this concept is temporal, unlike the spatial concept of Heaven and Hell in other traditions. Interestingly, the ancient Israelite notion of *Sheol*, a dark abode in the netherworld for good and bad, underwent significant changes in the late Second Temple period, distinguishing between the fate of the righteous and the fate of the wicked: the Garden of Eden and the *Gehinnom* (Greek *Gehenna*) (Hartman et al. 2007). The biblical word *Sheol* was simply understood as “grave” by the rabbis,¹¹ whereas the latter two concepts did not feature prominently in subsequent rabbinic cosmology: appearing sporadically in the *aggadic* (nonlegal) passages, they rather belonged to the interface of theology and folklore.

In contrast, the notion of having a share in the world to come was employed by the rabbis in the Mishnah as a tool to enforce certain basic articles of faith:

11 Refer to Marcus Jastrow (1903: 1505).

All of Israel [the Jewish people] has a share in the world to come, as it is stated: “Your people shall all be righteous; they shall possess the land forever. They are the shoot that I planted, the work of my hands, so that I might be glorified.” (Isa. 60:21). And these are those who have no share in the world to come: one who says the resurrection of the dead is not derived from the Torah; and one who says the Torah did not originate from Heaven; and an Epicurean. Rabbi Akiva says: Also one who reads apocryphal literature, and one who whispers invocations over a wound saying: “I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians, for I am the Lord who heals you” (Exodus 15:26). Abba Shaul says: also one who pronounces the Tetragram with its letters. (m Sanh 10:1)

Observe how the rabbis in the Mishnah (mainly late first to early third century CE) threatened with losing their share in the world to come those who would not accept the rabbis’ authority and who misused the Torah – for instance, those reading the wrong books, those pronouncing the text incorrectly, those misinterpreting it, and those employing it for magical purposes. Most interestingly, the rabbis included those who maintained that the Pentateuch does not mention the resurrection of the dead (only the prophetic books do) and who rejected the rabbis’ creative eisegeses. Additionally, an *epikores* (Epicurean) is also denied the world to come. This term, with a complex history, might have referred to one rejecting God’s involvement in worldly matters, that is, a divine MSP system.

Thus, having a share in the world to come is employed here as a reward and punishment system to maintain – in fact, to establish – a society with a rabbinic authority that advocates a specific reward and punishment system. With the Jewish people dispersed in the Roman and Sasanian Empires, and without the political means to ostracize heretics, the long process of rabbinization in the first millennium CE could not have taken place without efficient tools. I conjecture that the above MSP system could have been such a device.

Beyond the maintenance of rabbinic authority, however, having a share in the world to come, or losing it, is too crude a concept to regulate behavior; it should rather be viewed as a rhetorical tool in the Rabbinical literature. The passage above begins with a very strong statement, a radical reading of a verse from Isaiah, and it is followed by contradictory statements. Even if we read the second part as listing exceptions, we do not get a sufficiently fine-grained MSP system that directly influences everyday human behavior.

A more refined system is introduced in a different passage of the Mishnah, where prosocial behavior suddenly takes over theology:

These are the commandments that have no measure:¹² the corners of the field, the first-fruits, pilgrimage, righteous deeds, and Torah study. The following are the commandments for which one enjoys the usufruct in this world, while the capital remains for them in the world to come: honoring one's father and mother, righteous deeds, making peace between a person and their fellow, whereas Torah study [weighs] as much as them all. (m Peah 1:1)

The opening paragraph of the Mishnah tractate on *peah*, the laws on leaving the corners of one's field unharvested (Lev. 19:9 and 23:22), and on other gifts for the poor, understandably focuses on social and interpersonal issues. It suggests that we all harvest "credits" for fulfilling the commandments and performing good deeds in our lifetime. Some of these credits depend on passing some threshold, while other deeds earn you "recognitions" independently of the measure of your deed. Moreover, you can make use of these credits either in this world or in the world to come. Yet some deeds are so precious that you can safely enjoy their "interest" in this world while saving the "principal" for the world to come. Finally, Torah study – the number one value of the rabbis – is so much treasured that its credits equal the credits earned for all the other commandments taken together. Elsewhere in the Talmud (b BB 9a), rav Asi says, "Charity is equal to all other mitzvot combined." Since these are *aggadic* (non-*halakhic*) statements, the apparent contradiction does not pose any problem as long as the ethical values conveyed – the prominence of Torah study and charity – are compatible.

This section of the Mishnah is recited every morning as the first study passage from the Oral Torah. Hence, ritualization has ensured the interiorization of this credit-based MSP system. The life of the follower of Rabbinical Judaism is indeed a constant pursuit of merits (Hebrew *zekhut*) and avoidance of dishonors.

Should a person's own merits not suffice to ensure their goals (a good life, health, prosperity, a share in the world to come, etc.), they can even refer God to the merits of their righteous forefathers, such as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, since God promises in the Decalogue to show "steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandment" (Exod. 20:6 = Deut. 5:10). The merits of the martyrs are also sometimes referred to, for instance, in the *Avinu malkenu* supplication on High Holidays. Taking a step toward popular religion (still endorsed by many rabbis), praying at the grave of a righteous person would benefit the supplicant, because the righteous person's merits will contribute to their own.

12 Certain commandments have "measures" (defined by the Oral Torah, according to rabbinic lore) that specify the minimal amount needed to fulfill a mitzvah, or the threshold beyond which a prohibition is punishable. Yet in the listed cases, any small amount will suffice to fulfill the commandment.

Apropos, the extension of the system of supernatural punishment and reward beyond the worldly life also provides a quick answer to the apparent injustice present in our world. While we all have vices and virtues, the righteous who suffer in this world will only take virtues to the world to come, whereas the wicked, consuming all their virtues in this world, will have none left for the world to come.

The High Holidays, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, highlight the MSP system on a yearly basis. Based on some statements in the Mishnah, Late Antique and medieval Judaism developed a picture of God judging the destiny of each individual based on their deeds in the previous year and writing their names either in the Book of Life, or in the Book of Death. The decision made on Rosh Hashanah is sealed on Yom Kippur. Therefore, the month of Elul, before Rosh Hashanah, as well as the 10 days between (and including) these holidays are especially apt for repentance (*teshuvah*). The famous medieval poem (eleventh to twelfth century) from Germany *Unetanneh Tokef* most dramatically describes God's verdict on these days. Its closing words, however, provide relief: "But repentance, prayer, and charity mitigate the severity of the decree." The heaviness of these days, the long prayers with cantorial performances, and the 25-hours-long fast on Yom Kippur (not eating and not drinking at all) culminating with the sound of the shofar turn these days into a very intense experience.¹³ A set of imagistic rituals, they possibly pave the way for a "fusion mechanism" with local and global Jewries as the larger communities (Whitehouse 2021: 104).¹⁴

At the same time, the Mishnah emphasizes that divine atonement is granted only for sins that concern commandments on the relationship between man and God (*bein adam le-maqom*); but in the case of sins between humans (*bein adam le-havero*), one must first seek forgiveness from one's fellow human (m Yoma 8, 9), which obviously should also involve the fixing of any damage caused. Hence, the MSP system does enforce prosocial behavior and excludes workarounds.

Moreover, one must always make *teshuvah*, not only on or just before the High Holidays. "Repent one day before your death," said Rabbi Eliezer famously; yet, you cannot know when you will die (m Avot 2:10, and the commentary of Ovadiah of Bertinoro, based on Avot de-Rabbi Natan). Thus, the MSP system works all the year round, even if a certain period of the year is particularly dedicated to it. From a ritual frequency perspective, a noteworthy development is the introduction of the monthly Yom Kippur Katan (minor day of atonement) in some communities since the sixteenth century.

¹³ See also Tamás Biró (2013b: 129).

¹⁴ The question ought to be analyzed more carefully, including empirical studies. For a different approach to Jewish rituals, leading to a somewhat different conclusion, refer to Biró (2013a, 2013b).

To sum up, Rabbinical Judaism – as reflected in its earliest source, the Mishnah – views the Torah as God’s law book. Often, a worldly court of rabbis had to adjudge cases, and therefore, an elaborate legal system of civil law, family law, and even criminal law was developed in the Rabbinical literature (including the Mishnah, the Babylonian Talmud, medieval codices, and rabbinic responsa, among others). There are other cases, however, that are handled by the “heavenly court.” You can never know how many points you earn with a good deed and how many you lose with a wrong deed. Still, a supernatural punishment and reward system is constantly monitoring you. As Rabbi Judah Ha-Nasi, the compiler of the Mishnah, puts it in the tractate Avot, a special, nonlegalistic section, often called in English “The Ethics of the Fathers,”

Be careful with light commandments as with grave ones, as you cannot know the reward for the fulfillment of the commandments. Reckon the loss of a commandment against the reward, and the gain of a transgression against the loss. Look at three points to avoid transgression, and know what is there above you: an eye that sees, an ear that hears, and all your deeds are written in a book. (m Avot 2:1)

Case study 2: *Tikkun olam*

The expression *Tikkun olam* (repairing the world) is pervasive nowadays, referring to “Jewish responsibility for the welfare of society at large” (Blidstein 1995: 5). There is a joke that when the American president arrived in Israel, before starting his speech, he quietly asked his translator how to say “*Tikkun olam*” in Hebrew – that is, the expression is so ubiquitous that the president was not aware of its Jewish origin.¹⁵ This expression has a long history, and it has undergone many semantic shifts (Cooper 2013; Rosenthal 2005).

Rather than exploring the possible meanings of this elusive expression in Late Antique Rabbinical and liturgical sources, we turn to Isaac Luria (1534–1572), often referred to as the Arizal, the most influential sixteenth-century mystic in Safed. Although the product of a rabbinized and Babylonized Jewry, Jewish mysticism (Kabbalah) from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries onward also had its roots in neoplatonism, Gnosticism, and Late Antique Jewish mysticism in Palestine. Lurianic Kabbalah in the sixteenth century concerns us most here because many of its concepts, thoughts, and practices were adopted in subsequent centuries by popular movements, such as Shabbateanism, Frankism, and Hasidism. Unlike earlier mystical and philosophical works read by only a selected few, Luria’s system of thought

¹⁵ More than a joke, Levi Cooper (2013: 19–20) discusses President Barack Obama using this term several times.

had a significant impact on the socio-religious life of many Jewish communities in the last few centuries.

Lurianic Kabbalah proposed an absolutely novel doctrine of emanation and creation (Scholem 2007: 641–8 offers a much more precise and detailed description). It all began with the *Tzimtzum*, the “contraction” of the *Ein-Sof* (the Infinite), which provided space for worlds and ontological events. Next followed the “breaking of the vessels,” a cosmic catastrophe: the light emanating struck the vessels of the lower *Sefirot* (emanations), with pieces and sparks scattering and falling down, and the dark forces of evil took on substance (*kelippot*, shells or husks). All subsequent processes of creation are the beginning of the *Tikkun*, the “reparation,” the restoration of the original creation. Moreover, Man is designed to complete this *Tikkun*, separating the holy sparks from the *kelippot* and redeeming and lifting them on high, back to their origin.

Already in earlier kabbalistic works, such as the Zohar, performing the mitzvot had cosmic significance (Rosenthal 2005: 223). So in Luria’s system,

Israel has been dispersed in the Diaspora to gather the holy sparks and return them to heaven via Torah and righteous deeds. Since humanity created the problem of sin through Adam’s sin, it is up to humanity to repair that sin via deeds. (as recorded by Haim Vital; see Rosenthal 2005: 226)

Therefore, the cosmic catastrophe (“breaking of the vessels”), humanity’s catastrophe (Adam’s sin), and the catastrophe of the Jewish people (the exile) are coalesced, and performing the mitzvot of the Torah is the remedy for all of them. If transgressing God’s commandments leads to exile, according to Deuteronomy 11, then undoing the exile can be achieved by fulfilling God’s will. The gathering of the exiled people and the coming of the Messiah (their precise order being a matter of conflict between the religious Zionists and the anti-Zionists) will be followed by the resurrection of the dead and then by the world to come, a world of spiritual existence; thus, the three original catastrophes will be undone in reverse order. In popular versions of the Lurianic Kabbalah, Israel’s mission is to repair the world by performing the commandments and thereby hastening the coming of the Messiah.

The notion that performing mitzvot contributes to repairing the world also entered the liturgy of those communities, groups, and movements that were amenable to mysticism. For instance, the commandment in the Pentateuch to count 49 days from Passover to Shavuot, the Feast of the Weeks (Lev. 23:15; Deut. 16:9), called *sefirat ha-omer* (counting the omer) is easily associated with the seven lower *Sefirot*. Therefore, the following passage is recited by many each day from Passover to Shavuot, after counting the omer:

Master of the universe, You commanded us through Moses, Your servant, to count Omer Count in order to cleanse us from our encrustations of evil [*kelippa*] and from our contaminations, as You have written in Your Torah: “You are to count from the morrow of the rest day ...” (Lev 23:15–16) so that the souls of Your people Israel be cleansed of their contamination. Therefore, may it be Your will, Hashem, our God, and the God of our forefathers, that in the merit [*zekhut*] of the Omer Count that I have counted today, may there be corrected [or repaired, *yetukkan*] whatever blemish I have caused in the Sefirah [name of the sefirah appropriate for the day]. May I be cleansed and sanctified with the holiness of Above, and through this may abundant bounty flow in all the worlds. And may it correct [or repair, *letakken*] our lives, spirits, and souls from all sediment and blemish; may it cleanse us and sanctify us with your exalted holiness. Amen. Selah!¹⁶

In this new form of Judaism, infused with mysticism, the credits (merits, *zekhut*) one earns for fulfilling the commandments have an enhanced role. They are used not only to “buy yourself” divine reward in this world or in the world to come but also to “repair,” to correct your soul and the entire creation in a metaphysical dimension. Sins cause sediment and blemish to the *Sefirot*, but good deeds cleanse them. The reward is not simply your own share in the world to come but the redemption of the entire world.

Twentieth-century Reform rabbis Emil Fackenheim and Eugene Borowitz (Rosenthal 2005: 235) and educator Shlomo Bardin (Cooper 2013: 17) were among the first to employ the term *tikkun olam* in a novel sense in the United States in the mid-twentieth century. Originally proposed as a theological answer to the Holocaust (Krasner 2013: 62), this mixture of Jewish and social values resonated very well since the 1960s with left-wing ideologies among the American Jewry, including the progressive streams (Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism) and the heirs of Bundism, the former Yiddish-speaking secular socialist movement. It was soon adopted by Conservative Jews and later even by the modern Orthodox Jews (Shatz, Waxman, and Diament 1997). As Jonathan Krasner (2013: 62) observes, “By the end of the twentieth century, *tikkun olam* was widely acknowledged as a central Jewish tenet and even as a rationale for Jewish survival.”

The Lurianic usage and the modern usage of the expression share the same logic: the Jewish community/nation/people have an obligation toward the well-being of the entire world, and the good deeds of each individual fix some of the world's imperfections. Members of the community are rewarded by the conviction that their deeds are small but significant contributions toward a better future. At the same

16 From Nossou Scherman (1997: 285).

time, inaction leads to guilt about letting the world deteriorate, which is a kind of psychological pressure, and punishment.

Needless to say, the messianic visions of a sixteenth-century mystic differ enormously from the visions of a postmodern left-wing utopist. They would also disagree on what counts as a good deed. Should you hasten the coming of the Messiah by keeping Shabbat (the Sabbath) and leaving the lights on, or should you save the Earth by saving electricity? Should you slaughter animals according to the traditional rules of kashrut, or should you stun the animals beforehand? Should you observe the *shmitah* years (the Sabbath of the Land), exactly every seventh year, as prescribed by the Torah and the rabbis, or is it preferable to apply crop rotation with the newest agricultural technologies?

And yet in both cases, it is culturally postulated that an individual's actions are part and parcel of a joint enterprise by the larger (postulated) community. Given the strong link between joint attention and social cognition (Mundy 2018), it is reasonable to hypothesize that such actions will reinforce the individual's sense of belonging to the community.

As a sequel of the *Haskalah* (the Jewish Enlightenment), Abraham Geiger (1810–1874), the intellectual founder of Reform Judaism in Germany, equated Judaism with universal monotheism and ethics (Batnitzky 2011: 36–9). Moses Bloch (1815–1909), a conservative Talmudist and the first director of the Rabbinical Seminary in Budapest, wrote a long treatise, organized according to the structure of Maimonides's *Mishneh Torah*, explaining the universal moral values and motives behind each and every subfield of Jewish law (Bloch 1886). In this approach, unnoticed by the larger public, *halakhah* is not a goal but a necessary and sufficient means to achieve a universal moral ideal.

One wonders why Bloch's (1886) work did not boost religious observance among Hungarian Jews, why both concepts of *tikkun olam* were more successful in creating a proactive community than Bloch's reference to universal moral ideas. It turns out that it is not enough to propose a pleasant philosophy. You must also find cognitively adequate techniques to align people behind your cause. Probably Bloch's readers were not convinced that observing the traditional mitzvot would bring about a modern, enlightened, and moralistic version of the universal messianic vision: "The Lord will become king over all the earth; on that day the Lord will be one and his name one" (Zech. 14:9).

Summary

A famous teaching of Antigonus of Sokho in the Mishnah (Avot 1:3) states,

Do not be like the slaves who serve the master in order to receive a reward. Rather be like slaves who serve the master not in order to receive a reward. And let the fear of Heaven be upon you.

This very influential quote summarizes the threefold attitude of Rabbinical Judaism toward God. The primary task of a Jew in this world is to serve the Heavenly Master, whose orders are known from the Torah: from the text of the Pentateuch as expounded by the rabbis. The best way of doing so is by serving Him out of love: *li-shmah, le-shem shamayim* (i.e., “for the sake of heaven”). Yet, should a person not have the right disposition, a system of rewards as well as a system of threats (“the fear of Heaven”) are also in place to enforce the divine will.

While the rabbis have always emphasized the value of performing the mitzvot out of love for God, we have seen that several institutions have been in place for two millennia to support the MSP system in Judaism, the origins of which are thoroughly *nomian* (legalistic) (Hayes 2017: 2). Indeed, what forced Jews to adhere to *halakhah*, the Jewish law? Certainly not philosophical considerations, as demonstrated by the lack of impact of Bloch’s proposal. According to a famous dictum attributed to Ahad Ha’am, the most prominent representative of cultural Zionism, “More than the Jewish people have kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept them.” Yet, what mechanisms ensured that Jews would keep Shabbat, without which Jewish identity could not have been maintained? Moreover, what motives urged wealthy, and not so wealthy, Jews in all periods of history to invite the poor to their Shabbat tables and Passover Seder nights (the first night of Passover), to support charity organizations, and to ransom fellow Jews on the slave market? What motivated them to care for the sick, the foreigner, the orphan, the widow, and the dead – which is said to be the greatest of all mitzvot since the dead cannot return your good deed?

Social pressure is certainly one answer. At times, law enforcement measures were also available to the community. Another reason is the MSP system of Rabbinical Judaism, which emphasizes the collection of merits for performing mitzvot: either by the individual, who will have a share in the world to come, or by the entire world, which is awaiting redemption by the Messiah. Transgressions have the opposite effect.

In this chapter, special emphasis has been placed on liturgy as it is the most easily analyzed aspect of religion that has an impact on a social scale. Moreover, key structures of the liturgy probably preceded the rabbinization of Judaism. We have observed how Deuteronomy 11 recited twice a day and Mishnah Peah 1:1 recited upon awakening might have contributed to the interiorization of an MSP system. Deuteronomy 11, the second portion of the Shema, highlights *kabbalat ol mitzvot* (acceptance of the commandments), whereas Peah 1:1 promises that credits are valued both in this world and in the world to come. Historical events, such as the destruction of

the two Jerusalem Temples, have also been interpreted within this framework by the liturgy: "... because of our sins we were exiled from our country" is recited several times a year in the Musaf prayer for festivals.¹⁷

Future work should focus on the different channels through which a postulated system of supernatural punishment and reward is communicated to and interiorized by the larger Jewish population. Such channels might include pre-modern education (what did a *melamed* [religious teacher] say to the pupils in a *heder* [elementary Jewish school], and how?) and synagogues (what did a rabbi preach?) in pre-modern times. Ideas in philosophical, *halakhic*, and mystical works might also have reached, directly or indirectly, a larger audience. Only by looking at all those data together can we reconstruct the mechanisms by which a postulated system of punishment and reward contributed to the stability of Jewish communities, to the social cohesion of Jewries in an ever-changing Diaspora in Late Antique, medieval, early modern, and recent history.

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17 See, for example, S. Singer (1990: 646). A separate study would be needed to analyze all the occurrences of this statement in Jewish culture and to demonstrate how deeply it is engrained in Judaism. Regarding Judaism's perspective on history, the classic work is still Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's (1982) *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (several editions).

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