

<b>Retreat:</b> . . . . .	<b>Going Forward:</b>
The Past . . . . .	The Future
The popular voice . . . . .	The voice of God and Moses
Egypt as the desired object . . . . .	The Promised Land
Abrogates obligations to God . . . . .	Under obligation to God
The familiar, old life . . . . .	An unfamiliar, new life of Israelite law and practice
Slavery . . . . .	Liberation
Egyptian delicacies . . . . .	Manna
Punishment . . . . .	Reward
Retracing of steps . . . . .	Reaching the borders of Canaan
Death in unmarked graves . . . . .	Life for the new generation

The food and water found on the way are the signs of Divine providence. God, the guide through the wilderness, is also the predominant speaker. The realm of this section is the ideal, as the people live up to the demands placed upon them.

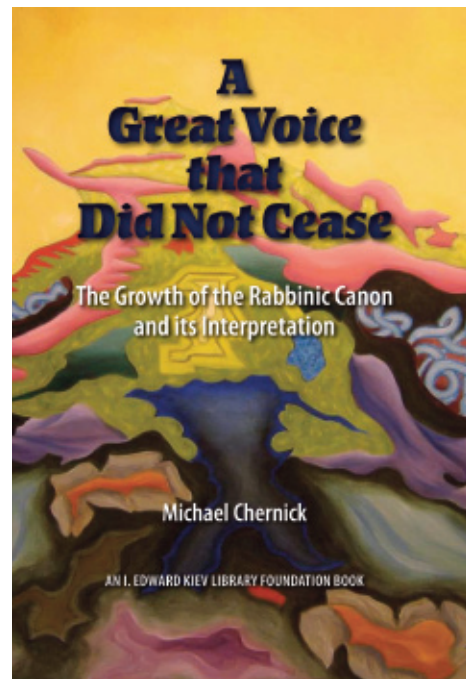
Yet Egypt renders God's aims in the present impossible. Egypt comes to represent a series of opposite images. Along the Egyptian axis are the voices of the people, through their complaints and the recounting of their old life. This is an axis of the concretely real and known: familiar food, familiar conditions and even a familiar relationship of ruler and oppressed. The people carry the vestiges of their lives in Egypt into the wilderness. To destroy Egypt, God must destroy the generation. Thus the axis of Egypt becomes the arena of death, as the people, now doomed to retrace their steps, end in unmarked graves in the Wilderness. This dichotomy is embedded in the larger narrative as illustrated by the chart above.

The two opposing series create an impassable divide between the Egyptian past and the promised future in the new Land. They also highlight the gap between an ideal, near abstract vision of what should be versus an unflinchingly honest depiction of how actual humans are likely to behave. Only a later hand, with access to both traditions, could organize the tales of the wilderness in order to develop and highlight those distinctions, preserving a record of the Wilderness Period as both ideal and its opposite, unrelentingly harsh and disappointing. Yet it does not stop there. As we will see, the editors of Numbers use those distinctions to creatively and strategically chart a way out of the wilderness...

The wilderness suggests a vista of wide open territory, free from unwelcome reminders of past lives and sorrows – a territory wonderfully situated for a newly forming, newly hopeful people. Recently liberated from oppression, in the wilderness Israel could shape itself into God's people, in the image offered by Moses and Aaron. They are close – very close – to accepting that vision, becoming that people. Overflowing with gifts for the tabernacle, contentedly following the pillars of fire and of smoke, listening to the sons of Aaron blow the trumpets. Suddenly, memories of their former lives, tastes and smells of Egyptian delicacies, haunt and overcome them. Cries and longings lead to rebellion and death. The rest of Numbers suggests that the visionary promise of its opening can only come into being by forcing an entire generation to watch the destruction of its elders, slowly but relentlessly over forty years. To give birth to new possibilities, Israel must reject its past. But such a rejection is exceedingly difficult, even after disappointment replaces desire. In the cries of Reuben and Gad Moses hears the futility of using the past at all. But they reassure him. They have in fact learned the lessons of their

parents. So too do the editors hear memories and longings that worry them. They too face the futility of relying on the past. Yet they reach the same conclusion as Moses. They accept the necessary and inevitable use of memory in fulfilling their most pressing agenda – shaping the story of the past in such a way as to lead the present audience forward into its future. ■

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**A Great Voice that Did Not Cease: The Growth of the Rabbinic Canon and Its Interpretation**

Michael Chernick, Hebrew Union College Press, 2009

Hermeneutics may be described as the development and study of theories of the interpretation and understanding of texts. They are essentially the lenses through which interpreters view the material they interpret. In this seminal study, Michael Chernick demonstrates how hermeneutical methods confronted the difficulties that arose for the Rabbis when various literary and logical problems appeared in scriptural texts and later in rabbinic texts. Given the Rabbis' theological, literary, and rhetorical concerns, these reading strategies were adopted to obviate the problems the texts presented.



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Chernick not only analyzes and illustrates these hermeneutical methods in great detail. He highlights the significant changes that occurred in rabbinic legal hermeneutics from the tannaitic through post-amoraic strata of rabbinic literature – some 500 years at least – as well as the persistence and continuity of rabbinic hermeneutical interests as evidenced through such changes.

Of particular significance is Chernick's connecting of those changes in hermeneutical practice to changing rabbinic views about the level of the revelatory status of non-Pentateuchal parts of the Hebrew Bible and of rabbinic legal discourse as they developed during the formative rabbinic period. Indeed, Chernick's study draws its title from the Torah's portrayal of the Sinaitic revelation, when God spoke to the assembled people with "a great voice that did not cease" (*kol gadol ve-lo yasaf* – Deut 5:19). This view, Chernick believes, is at the core of rabbinic Judaism – the Judaism that claims to hear that "great voice" through the medium of interpretation, a notion imaginatively illustrated on the dust jacket in the painting "Harim" by artist Miriam Stern.

The Pentateuch's description of the Sinaitic revelation speaks of how God communicated with the Israelite community. As Deuteronomy 5:19 portrays the event, God spoke to the assembled people with a "*kol gadol ve-lo yasaf*." This phrase does not yield easily to translation. Recent attempts have suggested that it means that God revealed "those words – those and no more...with a mighty voice." The "words," of course, refer to the famous "Ten Pronouncements," better known as the Ten Commandments. Traditional

Jewish *targumim* (Aramaic translations) and commentaries did not accept this translation or understanding of the verse. The standard *targum*, traditionally called *Targum Onqelos*, translates the phrase as *kal rav vela pesak*, "a great voice that did not cease," and the so-called *Targum Yonatan* translates it the same way. Rashi, the famous eleventh-century Bible and Talmud commentator, follows the *targumim*, though he adds a comment and provides an alternative thought. His comment is revealing. He writes, "And we translate 'and it did not cease' for God's Voice was strong and it exists forever..."

This study proceeds from the views expressed by the *targumim* and in the first part of Rashi's comment. As I understand those views, they propose that the Sinaitic revela-

tion was produced by a voice that spoke at that moment and did not cease to speak to the Jewish people throughout history. This view, I believe, is at the core of rabbinic Judaism, the Judaism that interpreted and claimed to hear that voice through the medium of interpretation. This study will take us even further than that claim. It seems that at certain points in time the canon that starts with the Pentateuch seems to grow and extend, or to put it in a formulation attributed to R. Elazar b. Azariah, "The words of the Torah are fruitful and multiply." Our study proposes that each extension views the next canonical text as part of the divine revelation, as part of the "great voice did not cease."

In order to trace the development of the ideas stated above, this work focuses on sev-

## Mediating Modernity: Challenges and Trends in the Jewish Encounter with the Modern World

Essays in Honor of Michael A. Meyer, Wayne State University Press, 2008

In *Mediating Modernity*, contemporary Jewish scholars pay tribute to Michael A. Meyer, scholar of German-Jewish history and the history of Reform Judaism, with a collection of essays that highlight growing diversity within the discipline of Jewish studies. The occasion of Meyer's seventieth birthday served as motivation for his colleagues Lauren B. Strauss and Michael Brenner to compile this volume, with essays by twenty-four leading academics, representing institutions in five countries.

*Mediating Modernity* is introduced by an overview of modern Jewish historiography, largely drawing on Meyer's work in that field, delineating important connections



between the writing of history and the environment in which it is written. Meyer's own areas of specialization are reflected in essays on Moses Mendelssohn, German-Jewish historiography, the religious and social practices of German Jews,

Reform Judaism, and various Jewish communities in America. The volume's field of inquiry is broadened by essays that deal with gender issues, literary analysis, and the historical relationship of Israel and the Palestinians. Contributors include David Ellenson, who offers an essay on "Michael A. Meyer and His Vision of Reform Judaism and the Reform Rabbinate: A Lifetime of Devotion and Concern."

