

What is religious and historical truth? This issue of Sh'ma addresses the most fundamental questions of faith and how we develop our personal theologies. Several leading Jewish thinkers and educators reflect on the sanctity and authority of the Torah.

## The Problematics of Myth

Neil Gillman

When I was a rabbinical student at the Jewish Theological Seminary, theology was taught as a dimension of Jewish intellectual history, what the great Jewish thinkers of old believed. With the notable exception of Mordecai Kaplan and Abraham Joshua Heschel, our teachers were not overly concerned with what we or our congregants-to-be might believe. When I began to teach, I felt it was my responsibility to help my students develop a personal theology that would cohere with the rest of their Seminary education and shape their teaching and preaching as Conservative rabbis. But then, they had the right to expect that I too would share my own theology.

My first encounter with the theological uses of the term myth was in Paul Tillich's *Dynamics of Faith*. I first read Tillich for my doctoral exams at Columbia, but it was only when I began to teach theology to JTS rabbinical students that I felt the full impact of his thought. That slim book remains central in my teaching and writing to this day.

My core issue was revelation. It continues to be, for me, the central theological issue: how one understands revelation determines how one deals with the author-

ity of Torah on all matters of Jewish belief and practice.

My Seminary education had successfully subverted any literalist understanding of the central Jewish revelational event as described in Exodus 19-20. I was taught that the Torah was a composite document, edited around the 5th century C.E., borrowing from the literature of the surrounding ancient Near Eastern cultures. That "critical" approach to the study of the Bible also questioned the historicity of the biblical narratives, including the Exodus from Egypt and the revelation at Sinai. The evidence for these conclusions struck me as persuasive. In addition, I had begun to question the very possibility of any human attempt to capture God's nature or activity in literal terms. I could

no longer believe that God literally "descends" on Sinai or "speaks" the words of Torah. If God were truly God, then God could not literally "speak." But then what was Torah? Whence its sanctity? Its authority? More broadly, what was the epistemological status of any theological claim? Finally, as a rabbi, how could I justify teaching and advocating the bulk of Jewish practice which, I continued to believe, remained central to any authentic understanding of Judaism? It was in this context that I reverted to the notion of myth.

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To this day, my use of the term troubles many of my students. The main problem is that, in American parlance, a myth is synonymous with a fiction, a fairy tale, or worse, a lie — as in the common practice of contrasting “the myth” with “the facts” or “the reality.” That conventional use of the term haunts me whenever I use it. When I teach “revelation,” I provide my students with a wide range of options, including the traditionalist literal understanding of the issue, along with the more liberal positions from the writings of Heschel, Kaplan, Buber, and Rosensweig. I also teach my own position — that the biblical account of the event at Sinai should be understood as myth. This is what I mean by the term.

1. There is no totally objective, human experience of the world. We construct reality from our simple perception of an apple to our most complex scientific theories. To this task we bring everything that makes us who we distinctively are, our genetic make-up, our educational and cultural baggage, and our intuitive, almost pre-conceptual, assumptions about what the world looks like. We perceive the world not through our eyes but through our brain, which applies interpretive structures to what is transmitted to us through our senses. Those structures are analogous to myths. Structural myths are often accompanied by narrative myths; the former describes the structure, while the latter tells how it came to be. Freudian psychoanalytic theory combines both, as does astronomy; Genesis 1 and Exodus 19 are classical narrative myths.

2. Myths, then, are not to be contrasted with facts. Instead, myths are the means by which we identify the significant facts. The more elusive the facts, the more the data elude direct human perception, the more inevitable and indispensable the myth (as in string theory, psychoanalytic theory, the biblical account of the Exodus, creation, and eschatology). In all of these cases, the myth posits an invisible world to account for what it is that we do see. Myths then inform the work of scientists, historians, and theologians.

3. Myths are the connective tissues that knit together the data of experience, thereby enabling these data to form a coherent pattern and acquire meaning — what Rollo May, in his *The Cry for Myth*, calls the beams of the house that are themselves invisible but without which the house could not stand. To use another metaphor from our childhood, myths are the lines that connect the dots on the page so that we

can see the bunny rabbit, except that now the dots are not pre-numbered. We have to choose the dots that we want to connect (i.e. the “facts”), then assign the numbers, then draw the lines. Sometimes, there are different connections to be made, each of which yields a different pattern (Copernicus vs. Ptolemy, Freud vs. Jung, white vs. black perceptions of American life, or Zionist vs. Palestinian perceptions of Middle East politics). It is precisely because these connecting tissues are themselves invisible that myths are frequently viewed as fictions.

4. Myths can be “living,” “broken,” or “dead” (Tillich’s terms). A living myth is one that works for us, that we embrace as “true,” that makes sense of the world as we perceive it. A broken myth is one that has been exposed as our subjective, human construct. Sometimes broken myths die; the contrary data have become overwhelming. (See Thomas S. Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* on the life and death of scientific paradigms. Kuhn’s paradigms function as myths.) Many adults experience the death of their personal myths; for many Americans, Vietnam killed the American myth. But broken myths don’t have to die. It is possible to embrace a broken myth as still living. That’s what I try to help my students achieve. The key step is Paul Ricoeur’s felicitous term, “second” or “willed naivete” (in contrast to the pre-critical stage of “primary naivete”). By consciously stepping back into the myth (as, for example, at the Passover seder), we restore its power, even though it is broken. That is by no means an easy step to take, but it is indispensable.

5. Finally, what makes a myth “true”? Clearly not because it corresponds to the facts, simply because we have no independent perception of those facts to compare it with. We cannot escape our humanness. But one myth may do a better job of integrating what we do perceive to be the data of experience; it accounts more adequately for more of what we perceive. For Jews, that myth is canonized in Torah. Myths are singularly tenacious. They also enjoy a certain “plasticity”; they can be reshaped to account for apparently discordant data. (Jews call that process *midrash*.) Finally, religious myths are existentially true; we make them true for us, they become true when we embrace them and live them. For me, the acid test is liturgy and ritual. Liturgy articulates the myth and ritual brings it vividly alive. My myth is true be-

cause I can *daven* from the traditional liturgy, and because Jewish ritual works brilliantly for me.

I can't count the number of times colleagues have suggested that I use some other term: *midrash*, construct, metaphor, paradigm, model. But each of these raises its own problems. The term myth works for

me, as does my myth, and I will continue using both.

*Neil Gillman, Chair of the Sh'ma Advisory Board, teaches Jewish philosophy at the Jewish Theological Seminary. His most recent book is Encountering God in Judaism (Jewish Lights).*

## Theological Issues for Orthodox Educators

Jack Bieler

I fully agree with Neil Gillman that a teacher of Jewish studies, whether within the context of a rabbinical seminary, graduate or undergraduate university program, day school, camp, or adult education setting, must be concerned with and draw attention to the theological implications of what she or he is presenting. While the familiarizing of students with the primary texts and corpus of Jewish tradition could be approached as exercises in decoding on the one hand, and/or historical, literary, sociological, and anthropological analyses on the other, for those of us who include among our educational goals the development of personal commitments to the traditions that are being studying, theological dimensions of the material must be formally considered.

The challenges of exploring theology with students will obviously be defined by one's particular denominational beliefs. For Orthodox rabbis and educators, an acceptance of *Torah min HaShamayim* (Torah revealed from the Heavens), i.e., a literal belief in the historicity of the Sinai experience, as well as particular events recorded in the Torah's written tradition, e.g., the Exodus from Egypt, are cardinal components of Jewish theology. An acceptance of the Torah's Divine origin goes hand-in-hand with acknowledging that God is aware of events that affect His creation and is prepared to provide guidance for and even intervene in human history.

Applying the construct of "myth" to one's belief, as Professor Gillman strives to do, is not an issue for the Orthodox educator. On the contrary, the presumption that the Torah is a document that contains Divine truths that are not restricted by temporal considerations due to God's transcendence of time and place, allows each student to develop a highly personal, immediate, and living relationship

with the Divine. This, by extension, manifests itself in ongoing and comprehensive observance of Jewish law and traditions. Perhaps the challenge facing Orthodox teachers is just the opposite of the struggles with which a JTS professor engages — if the Torah describes an intimate, viable, and ongoing relationship between God and not only the Jewish people in general but each Jew in particular, how can one account for the tragedies and apparent evil that appear to make up so much of our collective and individual experience?

If God and His Torah are not mere intellectual, cognitive constructs by which a person strives to make sense of the world, but rather real, existential verities that can be trusted and upon which one readily bases his/her lifestyle and communal activities, the "disconnects" with which we find ourselves grappling, e.g., the State of Israel's ongoing difficulties, instances of protracted disease and sudden death, and man's unflagging inhumanity toward his fellow man, continually challenge the validity of our theological premises. Theodicy becomes the burning issue raised when belief in revelation and *hashgacha pratit* (Divine concern regarding individual human events) are treated as postulates of Orthodox belief and are accepted fully by the practitioner of Judaism.

Explaining why "bad things happen to good people" is a perplexing problem to which can be attributed significant disaffection from religious practice and belief by Jews throughout the centuries. Due to the potential damage that can occur to one's faith as a result of dwelling on this conundrum, some would contend that the question is better left unasked, and the traditions dealing with such a question are best to be left unexplored. Yet, inevitably, despite the best efforts of a teacher to avoid dealing with such a topic, someone will ask



about it either in association with what is actually being studied or as a result of some sudden experience, insight, or perception. At such a moment, a teacher will have to decide whether or not to digress from the curriculum in order to address the issue before the entire class. If the instructor opts to explore possible answers to the question without having spent significant time developing a thoughtful approach to such a query, the presentation might be viewed by students as unsophisticated or as containing easily discredited ideas.

I would therefore argue that self-conscious, thoughtful, and well-developed investigations of

Jewish theology be proactively offered to all those engaged in obtaining Jewish education, in an attempt to make Jewish study not only culturally significant but also religiously meaningful. Whatever the particular denominational orientation of teacher and student, theology will provide an important perspective by which to regard and understand the diverse components of Jewish tradition.

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## Interpreting Torah as a Sacred Challenge

*Gordon Tucker*

It is hardly uncommon for us, denizens of the contemporary world, to open a book and to read an author's or editor's orienting note at the beginning: "This is a work of fiction, although it is based on fact..." "What follows is a parable..." "The volume before you is the result of relentless investigative reporting, and though its claims may at times seem incredible, they are all thoroughly documented..." We are offered such helpful directions all the time. And if we do not get such orientations from authors or editors, we are sure to get them from blurbs or reviews of the works in question. Once we have assumed the intended perspective on the piece of literature before us, it can do its work. In this way, volumes of fiction have had enormous impacts on societies and entire civilizations. They have even achieved canonicity and the authority such esteem engenders. The same can be said for works of philosophy, which invariably offer us not objective facts but rather interpretive schemes by which to identify, process, and utilize facts. Even (or especially) the very best and most authoritative philosophical works leave no doubt that what is presented is one conceptual grid among many, even as they recommend their own as the most comprehensive, persuasive, and fruitful of the alternatives. None of this strikes us as odd or manipulative. We would only feel misled if, for example, a work that solemnly averred its absolute facticity turned out to be a parable or a mere hypothetical reconstruction of irretrievable events.

It is against this backdrop that we ought to evaluate complaints that discoveries which tend to undermine belief in the facticity of the narrative in the Torah must also undermine its authority. Why should that be so? Is there a preamble to Genesis that conveys the Author's assurance that everything in this work is a straightforward description of actual events? There is, of course, no such preamble, or any other preface for that matter. This makes reading and using the Torah particularly intriguing and challenging. We must be our own guides in deciding what form of literature this is, and thus how to interpret it.

All of this is my own way of expressing some of the thoughts and perplexities that Neil Gillman has laid out for us in his essay on myth. So many times in the course of his teaching and lecturing, when challenged on how a religion can ground itself in anything but factual narrative and divinely transmitted law, Gillman has had occasion to ask, in puzzlement or even exasperation: "What's the big deal?" For reasons that I have sketched above, I completely sympathize with the question. What, indeed, is the big deal about a nonfactual reading of the Bible, even the biblical narrative of revelation itself?

Sympathizing with the question is, of course, not the same as taking license to ignore the matter. For more than a year, I have been meeting with approximately a dozen highly motivated and intelligent members of my congregation, who gather weekly for an hour prior to Shabbat morning services in order to seek greater clarity on these ques-

tions. Why should the Torah have authority over us? Why should we bend our lives to communal *halakhic* norms when we recognize them to be, at least in part, of human origin? They understand what Gillman and others have said and written about the nature and role of myths. But they don't find it easy to accept myth as an adequate grounding for religion. They are uneasy with the softness of conviction that is generally associated with something considered to be subjective and thus relative. The task for those of us who understand Judaism in Gillman's way is both to honor this unease and to point the way to answers.

Two promising avenues are these:

1. Stanley Fish's recently expressed notion that the existence of rival myths or conceptual grids does not erase the accumulated achievements and aspirations of the community that holds the myth we are evaluating. For example, the role that the Exodus story has played in bettering human life through millennia is at least as important in assessing its value as the discovery that it describes actual events of the 13th century B.C.E.

2. The realization, already expressed by Rav Hai Gaon in the 11th century, that there is ultimately no way to validate the authority of Torah apart from the community that accepts it. Without the deference of the community, a Torah scroll is simply parchment with ink spots. And if we are willing to stake our entire way of living on the conviction of the historical community that this scroll expresses a transcendent truth, then we ought to give the accumulated *halakhah* of the historical community at least as much deference.

Such approaches may set a somewhat higher and more generalized standard than Gillman's idea that his own held myth is true because it works for him personally. More important, I have found that myths have the potential to speak to the genuine seekers in our community, who have taken up the sacred and unavoidable challenge of interpreting Torah for our lives.

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## Theology on the Far Side of Myth

Arthur Green and Or Rose

**W**e wish to thank Rabbi Gillman for initiating this thought-provoking discussion. As students of the Jewish mystical tradition — an ancient body of literature that articulates the unique relationship between myth and theology in evocative and imaginative terms — we are particularly interested in exploring this subject in a contemporary framework.

It must be stated at the outset that we are sympathetic to Gillman's use of the term myth. Particularly powerful at this moment when the world is so polarized by competing truth claims (both religious and political), his interpretation of the word myth reminds us of the importance of maintaining an epistemological humility even in the midst of heated debate on matters of ultimate concern.

Given the limits of this forum, we shall focus our attention on one central issue raised in his article — the challenges of entering a broken myth, of piecing together the sacred fragments of our lives in the face of theological uncertainty. This process is, as Gillman notes briefly, complicated. It requires several stages of reflection and questioning. One important step in that process is admitting to the pain of losing one's theological "naivete." Whether this happens in childhood, adolescence, or adulthood (it likely occurs at various moments in all three life stages), losing this "naivete" can be a disorienting and troubling experience that must be acknowledged and mourned. While this might ultimately lead to positive growth and transformation, the shadow side of this experience cannot be denied.

Related to this is the fact that, when we attempt to enter a broken myth, we do so tenuously, without the confidence or sense of authority that we may have once felt. If, for example, Sinai is no longer a literal event, then we no longer have the weight of divine authority to motivate our commitments. This

leads us to ask a difficult question, for which there is no easy answer: Is it ever possible to reconstruct our religious myths so that they inspire serious religious commitment in thought and deed, or does our new consciousness prevent us from ever engaging the tradition wholeheartedly? Further, if we enter our broken myths with appropriate hesitation and uncertainty, what do we have to offer those who turn to us for guidance and support? What can we say

to the convert, the school child, or the adult seeker?

As we attempt to reclaim our myths, we must also carefully examine our motivations for doing so. What moves us to return? Is it nostalgia, emotionalism, or perhaps our aesthetic sensibilities? While these factors may be important to our reclamation project, we must also ask, is there a theological impulse guiding our decision? Rabbi Gillman tells us that

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*Sinai is true not because God may or may not have spoken to the Israelites in the wilderness, but because we have experienced the awesome presence of the Divine in our own wanderings/wonderings.*

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he is not a literalist. However, he does not reveal the content of his own mythologized beliefs. Does this mean that after one admits to the power of myth, there is nothing left to say theologically? In other words, can one make any *faith* claims on the far side of myth?

Our response to this question is yes. One can address myth through the use of a post-literalist hermeneutic, drawing truths from the tradition that transcend the details of any particular narrative. Sinai is true not because God may or may not have spoken to the Israelites in the wilderness, but because we have experienced the awesome presence of the Divine in our own wanderings and wonderings. The same is true of the creation story. While the details of this legend may no longer speak to us, we have been touched by the immanent Divine presence within the natural order or during peak creative moments.

Entering a broken myth means that we accept living a life of theological tension. A mature theol-

ogy holds the paradox of the human condition in its embrace. The Zohar, the greatest of all Jewish mystical works, makes this point eloquently when it teaches that the word *Elohim* (the generic name for God in the Bible) actually consists of two separate words: *mi* (who) and *eleh* (these). Parsing the name *Elohim* in this manner teaches us that when speaking of God we must always do so in two modes. One is through the use of constructive theological language, through the mode of *eleh* — “these” are the things that we are willing to affirm about God. The other is through negative theological language, through the mode of *mi* — we accept the fact that, beyond all of our attempts to articulate a vision of

divinity, there exists the God of “who?” — the One who transcends all human language and imaginings.

As theologians we believe that the project of reweaving the fabric of our religious lives requires that we engage, unapologetically, in discussions about God. At the same time we acknowledge that, in our spiraling search for the Infinite, we inevitably return to a place of questioning and mystery.

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### Letter from the Editor

Dear Friends,

I want to take this opportunity to share with you news from the *Sh'ma* editorial office. We have just begun a strategic planning process to learn more about how the journal can find, serve, and grow its readership. The process includes being both imaginative and practical — looking at our vision and our financial stability. We have drafted statements of purpose and vision, which we share with you here.

The purpose of *Sh'ma* is to enrich the texture and diversity of Jewish life by expanding the parameters of Jewish conversations. What issues find their way to our communal agenda? And what do we discuss around the shabbes table? We envision *Sh'ma* to be the forum for introducing ideas and facilitating the evolution of discussion. We hope that the journal encourages creative thinking about long-standing issues as well as issues only emerging in the 21st century. A readers' survey to evaluate your opinions and suggestions will be sent during the next months. Please respond candidly.

You should have recently received a letter as part of the annual *Sh'ma* Appeal. Like most publications, subscriptions and grants only cover part of the costs we incur. *Sh'ma* depends on you — our friends and readers — to keep the journal financially healthy. Please look for the Appeal card in the mail and respond generously. Gift subscriptions (only \$15/year

for subscribers) introduce new readers to *Sh'ma* while building a greater reach for the journal. Share *Sh'ma* with your friends and family!

The year 2002 is approaching, and we are starting to plan our Purim issue. At this somber moment in our history, humor is an important piece of our identity and continued strength. Send your ideas for Purim *Sh'ma* to SusanB@JFLmedia.com by January 15<sup>th</sup>.

We are hoping to expand the December issue of *Sh'ma*, which addressed Ethics and Fighting Terrorism, into a book this winter. The book will include additional essays, a selection of High Holiday sermons drawing on Jewish sources and teachings responding to the attack, and a section focusing on issues related to families and education — how to teach and talk about these ethical questions with children.

Although we do not publish many letters to the editor, I do welcome and respond to your letters and suggestions. Your letters can be sent via email to: SusanB@JFLmedia.com, or via post to: P. O. Box 9129, Newton, MA 02464. We will try to make available more space within the journal over the next year for publishing these letters. We recognize the value of dialogue on the issues we raise.

I'll look forward to hearing from you.

*B'vracha,*

*Susan Berrin*

Susan Berrin, Editor



“The secret things belong unto the Lord our G-d, but the things that are  
Because what was “revealed” to Moses was interpreted through what I perceive as the patriarchal, militaristic, homophobic  
using these harsh terms regarding the Five Books of Moses. For years, I respectfully called these texts “problematic” or  
hidden, the *yaish mi-ayin*, there is from nothing. I approach Jewish theology and myth as a visual ar



■ **Current**

*V’ruach Hashem noshevet al hamayim*

“And the breath of the Lord rested upon the waters.” Genesis 1:2

Then I shall float two sacs on the waters of Japan en route to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. These sacs contain seeds to begin the world anew. There, on the banks of the Kamagawa River, I read from Genesis to Japanese students: their teacher translated into Japanese my reading of the boy infant who was floated in a small *taiva*, arc, on another river — the River Nile — while three women — the baby’s mother, older sister, and the Egyptian princess — served as baby Moses’ protectors.

Helène Aylon: “Two sacs en route,” Kamagawa River, Japan 1985 video, Sony Jumbotron, New York Times Square 1995

■ **The Book That Will Not Close**

*Chazak, Chazak V’nitchazaik*

“Hold on, Hold on and We Will Be Strong” (chanted at the conclusion of each book of the Torah)

I looked for *Ha’Nistar*, the hidden, in The Five Books of Moses, but all I could see was the absence of women’s presence; this did not strengthen me spiritually. I therefore put a pink dash inbetween words where the female presence was omitted. This included all of the “begots.”

Because women were erased, they emerge more strongly as a myth to be uncovered. After years of highlighting the misogynist words attributed to G-d and approaching them as feminist *midrash*, “The Book That Will Not Close” appears to have become a sacred object. It neither fully opens nor closes.

Helène Aylon: “The Liberation of G-d,” Jewish Museum 1996; Armand Hammer Museum UCLA 1997; National Museum of American Jewish History, Philadelphia 1998





Mythology  
Aylon

revealed belong unto us and to our children forever." Deuteronomy 29  
 bic, and misogynist worldview of Moses, I long only for "the secret things" that "belong unto our G-d." Forgive me for  
 "difficult." But in order to save Judaism for myself after years of rationalizing, I turn to myth and *sod*, secret, the *nistar*,  
 tist and I prefer what I don't see to what I see. The following describes four of my art installations.



■ *My Notebooks*

*V' Sheenante m  
 L'vanecha*

"And you shall  
 teach this to your chil-  
 dren" (from the daily  
*Sh'ma*)

My Notebooks alas  
 were empty throughout  
 all my years at the  
 Shulamith School for  
 Girls in Boro Park and  
 the Midrasha Yeshiva in  
 Boro Park because they  
 were devoid of  
 women's commentary. I  
 therefore created a  
 monument to my  
 strangely silent ancient  
 foremothers made of  
 the blank notebooks. I

turned the blue-lined pages inward. There are 54 note-  
 books for the 54 portions of the Torah. Onto these  
 coiled pages I project a photograph of my  
 Shulamith School graduation, which fades  
 in and out like a mirage. And the wall of  
 notebooks appeared like fluted, broken  
 columns, but still an edifice: *Yaish mi-ayin*,  
 there is from nothing.

*Helène Aylon: "My Notebooks,"  
 Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art  
 2000; Brandeis University Women's Stud-  
 ies Research Center, 2001*

■ *My Marriage Bed*

*It is said that there should be three in the bed: the two  
 lovers and the One above.*

Let me tell you about The Bed, for I lived within  
 a system that followed the planets. During the times  
 I bled, I did not even pass the salt at the table for  
 fear that my hands would touch my husband's  
 hands. Perhaps an ancient wife who lived in a po-  
 lygamous household devised this system.

She watched her monthly cycle and brought  
 other women to bathe together and watch their own  
 cycles as they watched the New Moon.

It is written in Leviticus that it is the man who  
 must bathe "if he touches her or touches what she slept  
 on during her impurity." Nowhere is it written that  
 the woman must bathe. I say it was she who began  
 the immersion into The Bath long before that practice  
 got codified with terms like "unclean" (the term that  
 was used for a leper or a corpse). This I know: the  
 term "unclean" came from those who do not bleed.

*Helène Aylon: "My Bridal Chamber," Washington,  
 D.C. Jewish Community Center 2001*





## Revelation and Authority

Gordon M. Freeman

**D**id it really happen that way? Where is God now? Does God still speak to us? Does the Torah actually quote God, or Sarah, or Jacob? Being a text-based tradition, we need to understand that the words that are recorded can never be synonymous with the event they describe. It is not a matter of the "truth" or "reality" of the text. Words, which are the windows to the world, also form barriers. I read the words of the Torah from my own perspective of time, place, personal situation, and perspective. Once the words jump from the page into my brain, the process of interpretation continues. The original author began interpreting the events by choosing one set of words rather than any other set in recording a version of the Divine message. I organize the words of the sacred text based on the mythic structure of my own perspective. That perspective might be learned from traditional sources, but each person, will bring his or her own unique experience to textual interpretation. What really happened at creation, during the flood, or at Mt. Sinai? I have no idea, for before me is someone's record, already an interpretation.

It is, perhaps, for this reason that the mystic Rabbi Mendel of Rymanov states that only the *aleph*, the first letter of the first word of the decalogue, was given at Sinai. The letter *aleph* does not contain a sound, only the potential for sound if supplied by the addition of a vowel. Revelation, then, begins with silence, the pregnant possibility of sound that we supply. What Israel heard at Sinai was supplied by her own sounds (as interpreted by Moses, according to the Rambam). We are constantly supplying the sounds through *midrash*, interpretation, schol-

arship — through our questions.

Indeed, when we stand before the open Torah, our blessing proclaims not that God gave us the Torah but that God *gives* us the Torah. Revelation is a continual process, like creation (which, according to the liturgy, is renewed every day) and redemption (the *amidah* declares that God redeems us — *go'el*).

Tradition's claim that the Torah is the source of authority for Jewish life is based on the assertion of Divine revelation. But even within the Torah itself, authority is not based on text but on consent. This revolutionary idea, that even God's authority is not intrinsic but dependent on consent, is a ubiquitous theme. Abraham challenges God's authority. Moses questions it constantly. The dramatic moment is found in Exodus when God tells Moses to ask the people if they will even accept the Torah. Only after they state, *na'aseh*, we will do it (Exodus 19:8), does God's revelation begin.

In the classic account of the chain of authority found in Pirke Avot 1:1, the text does not state (despite some incorrect translations) that God gave *the* Torah to Moses but Torah to Moses (without the definite article): the Torah text that we have is only one version of the entire Torah, which includes not only the written text but the oral tradition as well. We have seen how our changing understanding of the written text becomes a source for continual commentary. The oral tradition is in a state of constant discovery and rediscovery. We keep finding fresh insights into God's revelation. God still gives us Torah. Revelation was not completed at Sinai. The text has authority for our lives because we consent to its authority. We authorize God to provide us with Torah. Every prayer, blessing, and ritual in Jewish life is a consent event.

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## Ode to Mrs. York

Erica Brown

**W**henever I hear or use the word myth, I think of my 9th-grade English teacher, Mrs. York (a fine name for an

excellent English teacher). I can recall the tedious memorization of the various Greek gods and the powers they represented and imagine

them convened on Mount Olympus in a large stone amphitheater, laughing as they recounted the chaos they were wreaking on human beings. When I studied biblical stories, it never dawned on me then to treat the Garden of Eden or Noah's flood as myths. Just as I never considered Greek myths anything more than fiction, I never considered the Hebrew Bible as anything other than fact. I saw the etiological value of myths but never found them compelling. The gods were too cruel. My attitude to my own sacred literature was different because I had a commitment to it. I did not confront it as fiction nor did I acknowledge its own sharp edges. Today, my attitude has matured and become more nuanced, but I still think that our locus of commitment influences the way we read and our attachments to what we read. There are a lot of beautiful children in the world but none cuter than my own.

Reading Neil Gillman's provocative essay, I found myself once again sitting in the back of Mrs. York's class. He makes many important points about sharing theology and not only studying it. He also dabbles in larger questions like anthropomorphism, the critical study of the Bible, and the sanctity of ancient texts. Some of the most substantive issues he raises might have been left for lengthy articles and books. Because he considers many different issues in the span of a short essay, I would like to focus on his use of the word myth and an important distinction that he did clarify. When he discusses the authority of the Bible and his own critical approach, he is using the term "myth" the way it is literally defined. The Oxford English Dictionary defines myth as, "A purely fictitious narrative usually involving supernatural persons, actions, or events, and embodying some popular idea concerning natural or historical phenomena." When he uses myth as a form of personal perception, the word takes on another meaning. Facts, in this sense of the word, can also be considered myths because, as Gillman says, "there is no totally objective, human experience of the world." Our lives are colored by events and interactions with others that are constantly being interpreted. A social constructivist would say that this hermeneutic web helps us in the construction of our personalities, personal his-

stories, and world views. The important distinctions that Tillich makes between "living," "broken," or "dead" myths add to the way in which our personal narratives change over time and through experience.

There needs to be a more explicit difference between the way Gillman uses myth in regard to revelation, and myth in the way that humans formulate their narratives. Regarding the second usage, I think people can accept a definition of myth and perhaps even incorporate it into their own vocabularies without the squeamishness that Gillman describes in his students' reactions to the word. However, I think Mrs. York and the Oxford English Dictionary have had too much influence on the way we regard the word myth to make it a feasible, popular usage for biblical narratives, at least in most Jewish circles. Gillman may be forcing it on those around him without realizing that he is treading on sanctified ground. Perhaps he wants to tread on that ground and introduce niggling doubts. However, there is also the matter of respect — so important in these days of relativism. Using the word myth, for example, in reference to revelation forces even the casual listener into an encounter with his or her own belief system that may not be desired. It is not a comfortable word. It also does not allow an idea or a story to remain in that special religious category between fact, and fiction called tradition. Heritage is not the same as history; memory is not the same as fact but few of us would argue that one is more valid than another. We validate those distinctions because we understand that memory, heritage, and tradition are the bulwark of commitment. The word myth somehow gnaws away at commitment and trivializes that which is most precious to us. I am glad that the word works for Gillman. I hope he will be understood and that in using it he will show sufficient respect to those who still read in the word its pejorative character. Since the ninth grade, however, the word myth has not worked for me.

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*Her weekly drashot are found on [www.shma.com](http://www.shma.com).*



### Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary

(Senior Editor David Lieber, The Rabbinical Assembly, The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, and the Jewish Publication Society, 1560 pp with Index, 2001, \$72.50)

The Hertz, Soncino, and Plaut commentaries are books familiar to anyone who sits in shul on a Saturday morning listening to the reading of the Torah. We slip those books out of their places in the pew and look to them to explain and elucidate the Torah portion. We have come to rely on them for adult Torah study as well as for children preparing for bar and bat mitzvah. I have no doubt that the new Conservative commentary, *Etz Hayim*, will soon be considered an indispensable and enlightening tool for the deepening of Torah knowledge.

Each of the weekly portions is divided into *peshat* — the simple meaning of the text — and *drash* — the homiletic, spiritual, and often more probing meaning of the text. In some places there is a third piece — *halakah l'ma-aseh* — giving the reader a practical application of the text in ritual or legal terms. Those practical applications usually mirror traditional Jewish law unless they diverge from Conservative practice; such is noted, along with Ashkenazic and Sephardic differences.

While the *peshat* is helpful, the *drash* commentary really shines. In addition to wonderful midrashic and talmudic offerings, the questions, concerns, and insights offered by *drash* editor Harold Kushner draw me in. They are scholarly and spiritual, astute and empathetic, providing worthy material to teach and quote for both beginners and advanced-level Torah study. I can imagine that a new generation of bar and bat mitzvah students will find that the material speaks to them as well.

The commentary's Introduction promises a sensitivity to the roles of biblical women. I put the book to the test by turning to several portions. In Genesis, I looked at the verses that describe Eve eating the fruit of the tree; in Leviticus 12, I looked at the laws of menstruation; and then to the unfaithful woman (Sotah) of Numbers. I was not disappointed. These difficult portions are dealt with both unapologetically and unpatronizingly; large existential questions are posed and new insights of women are obvious. I would have hoped that other controversial issues, such as the homosexuality laws of Leviticus 18, received fuller treatment. The prohibition of men lying with men is somewhat glossed over, with a note in *halakhah l'ma-aseh* that "Conservative Movement resolutions call on congregations to welcome gay and les-

bian congregants in all congregational activities." The actual text, however, is not tackled adequately. One senses a reluctance to fully discuss the text, which seems odd in light of other sections where issues are dealt with unambiguously — such as a beautiful and sensitive *drash* commentary that addresses the prohibition of disabled men from the priesthood in Leviticus 21. I was disappointed that the commentary did not use gender-inclusive language. Though the Introduction apologizes for the JPS translation that retains exclusively male language for God, the essays still use "man" for humanity. In this century a new commentary could have called for a new, gender-inclusive language, with no need for the old apologies.

Many wonderful modern scholars are quoted throughout the *Chumash*. Though most of the scholars are understandably from the Conservative movement, with great names like Louis Finkelstein and Abraham Joshua Heschel, the commentary also includes Orthodox scholars like Rav Soloveitchik and Aviva Zornberg. I am left to wonder why great Reform scholars like Gunther Plaut are never quoted. This appears to be a strange and pointed exclusion, unworthy of a commentary meant to be used by a wide array of students and teachers.

Each of the 41 essays at the back of the book is well worth reading; even the color maps and glossary are useful additions. The weekly *haftarot* are explicated with introductions that succinctly clarify their relationship to the weekly Torah portion, making *Etz Hayim* an even more "user-friendly" chumash for both congregant and student.

*Etz Hayim* is an important addition to the growing library of modern Torah scholarship, one that will inevitably enrich the Jewish community and all who seek Torah wisdom. It was obviously a loving labor of the Conservative movement whose fruit will be shared and enjoyed by all.

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*Moftim* can be translated as “wonders.” Moses is drawn to the wonder of a bush that burns without being consumed, but I question whether our “bond with God was cemented by the sound and fire of Mt. Sinai.” In Exodus 20: 15-16, the people tremble before the “thunder and the flames” and say to Moses, “You speak to us and we shall hear; let God not speak to us lest we die.” Even though Moses tells the people not to fear, they still stand far off, i.e. they show no desire to come near the flames.

Fire is a force for good and evil, but even before that, fire is a source of wonder and fear. I am not convinced that fire is the proof that we are God’s Chosen. When God encountered Elijah, the prophet learned that God was “not in the wind,” nor the earthquake, “and after the earthquake, a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice” (I Kings 19:11-12). It is when fire no longer fills us with awe and fear that we are unable to hear the “still small voice,” but hear our own voices instead masquerading as that of God.

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Signs and portents are ambiguous at best except in the hindsight of sacred history. The acts of God should not be confused with the acts of humankind. Fire

warms, cooks food, and provides energy to sustain life. This is the fire that God commands. Alien fire, which God does not command, consumes life and drives both God and humankind from each other in fear. After we crossed the Red Sea, God silenced the rejoicing angels and reminded us all that even our enemies are God’s children. One people’s redemption is often at the expense of another people’s life.

The greatest vision of redemption is not the special effects of our rescue from Egypt. It is prophet Isaiah who envisions not holy war but the transformation of nature and the transformation of society. Lions and lambs will both be friends and vegetarians. Swords and spears will become plowshares and pruning hooks. The weapons of war are but temporary security — a false vision of power.

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ויציאנו ה' מצרים ביד חזקה: ויתן ה' אותות ומפתים גדלים ורעים במצרים בפרעה ובכל-ביתו לעינינו: דברים ו:כא-כב

The Lord brought us out from Egypt with a mighty hand. The Lord showed us marvelous and destructive signs and portents in Egypt, against Pharaoh and his entire household; and us He freed from there.

Deuteronomy 6:21-22

The Hebrew word *moftim*, portents, is connected in *midrash* with temptation, *mefateh*, and in turn with fool, *peti*. God tempts Moses with the fire of the burning bush and Moses sets out on a mission to redeem his people. Israel’s bond with God was cemented by the sound and fire of Mt. Sinai.

Signs and portents, especially destructive ones, tempt us and our leaders to take action — waving flags and feeling secure. But signs and portents can make fools of us when we confuse them with truth. The danger of flamboyant and destructive signs is that they tempt us to make destruction a commonplace reality. Pyrotechnics are associated with humankind’s need for proof of God’s existence. S/He who controls fire seems to control the approach to God. Fire is both a force for good and a force for evil. It is both marvelous and destructive. We cannot underestimate its potential. Firepower is a portent of life: in some traditions, rifles are shot at weddings. Firepower is an agent of death: rifles are shot at military funerals. To the followers of the Taliban, the replaying of the burning of the WTC Towers is proof that their God of fire lives, just as our yearly re-reading of the Torah portion is proof to us that we are God’s chosen. Must the proof be so dramatic?

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Another story about fire: the prophet Elijah, in a challenge to the prophets of Ba’al, brings down a heavenly fire to consume an offering to Adonai. Elijah then slaughters the false prophets and flees to Horeb, the mountain of revelation. There, Elijah encounters God in a new way: “YHWH passed by, and there was a great and powerful wind, splitting mountains and shattering rocks, but YHWH was not in the wind. And after the wind, an earthquake; but YHWH was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake, fire; but YHWH was not in the fire. And after the fire, a still small voice.”

God was not in the fire that consumed Elijah’s offerings, nor in the fiery slaughter of the misguided prophets of Ba’al. God was awaiting Elijah in a voice he had not yet learned how to hear. Perhaps it is time for us to learn with Elijah that God is not in the fire of vengeance or the myth of “chosenness.” Let’s look for God instead in the stillness of listening, in the willingness to hear and be open to Truth no matter where it is found. Let us honor the uniqueness of our own tradition even as we acknowledge the value of every path that allows us to hear the clear, still voice of Godliness.

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\*NiSh'ma is the Hebrew word for “let us hear.”



## Hannukah and Miracles

Marcie Lenk

What are we celebrating when we light our Hannukah candles? Do we believe that Judah Maccabee found a cruse of oil that miraculously lasted for eight days? Some of us are too sophisticated to believe in miracles. Some of us know that the oil story is never mentioned in any of the books of the Maccabees and only found in the Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 21b. If such an event had taken place, we would expect the “historical” books to wonder about it. Thus we conclude, the cruse of oil is the Jewish Santa Claus — a good story for children, but a myth to grow out of.

But there is more miracle to the oil story. According to 1 Maccabees, Mattathias was a contemporary of Phinhas. He, his sons, and their followers defended Jewish faith and tradition against Antiochus IV Epiphanes and against the Hellenized priests. The Maccabees were heroes — models of strength and faith.

*Al Hanissim*, the addition for Hannukah added to *Birkat Hamazon* and the *amidah*, focuses on the spiritual aspect of the victory of the Hasmoneans, noting that their success was a miracle: “the strong into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few.” *Al Hanissim* adds an element of miracle not mentioned in the Book of Maccabees: God. *Al Hanissim* celebrates God’s intervention in the battle between good and evil.

Neither Maccabees nor *Al Hanissim* mention the oil lasting eight days. Without that story, why would we have an eight-day festival? 2 Maccabees 10 explains that the eight-day festival was a replacement of Sukkot, which Jews were unable to celebrate that year. But 1 Maccabees 4, describing the cleansing and rededication of the Temple, does not mention Sukkot.

Aside from Hannukah, the only eight-day festival known in Jewish history was the celebration of the dedication of the altar and the Temple. Leviticus 8 describes the eight days of dedication of the Tabernacle. The high point of the celebration was fire from heaven, the sign that God ac-

cepted the offerings.

Similarly, after Solomon built the Temple in Jerusalem and after an eight-day dedication, he blessed the people (1 Kings 8). The parallel in 2 Chronicles 7:1-3 adds the element of fire from heaven consuming the dedication offerings. These sources seem to be the background for the eight-day dedication festival in 1 Maccabees.

The Babylonian Talmud tells of an ancient eight-day festival in the winter. “Our Rabbis taught:

When Adam saw the day getting gradually shorter, he said, ‘Woe is me, perhaps because I have sinned, the world around me is being darkened and returning to its state of chaos and confusion; this then is the kind of death to which I have been sentenced from Heaven!’ So he began keeping an eight days’ fast. But as he observed the winter solstice and noted the day getting

increasingly longer, he said, ‘This is the world’s course,’ and he set forth to keep an eight days’ festivity. In the following year he appointed both as festivals” (Avodah Zara 8a).

This source mentions neither Sukkot nor a dedication festival. It does not explicitly make any connection to Hannukah. But the ancient eight-day festival, celebrating light in the midst of the winter, must be connected to Hannukah.

The Talmud in Avodah Zara records an ancient pre-Jewish tradition of a winter festival of lights. In 164 B.C.E., when the Hasmoneans rededicated the Temple, they reinterpreted that ancient tradition in Jewish terms — celebrating the renewal of the light of the festivals (Sukkot) and of the Temple. In the context of their rededication, they might have remembered the fire that came down from heaven in the days of Moses and Solomon. The Talmud’s tractate Shabbat connects fire to the rededication by telling the story of the miraculous oil. The idea of God’s revelation is carried on, although this time in a more humble context. Did that miracle actually take place in 164 B.C.E.? While there is no way to prove its historicity, the power

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*Al Hanissim  
adds an element of  
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Book of Maccabees:  
God.*

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of this myth allows us to see God behind the military victories of the Maccabees, behind the physical dedication of the Temple and its vessels, and behind the light in the darkness.

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## Debunking Myths

Jonathan Krasner

Quiz the typical Hebrew school child on Jewish history and one will likely discover that the boundary between history and myth is murky indeed. I'm not only referring to the concept of myth in its broadest sense, as foundation story or belief that embodies some kind of visionary ideal. I'm also talking about garden-variety half-truths, exaggerations, and wishful fantasies — consciously or unconsciously fabricated — that are uncritically accepted by many who generally consider themselves to be critical thinkers. I present some of the most prevalent Jewish myths, ripe for the iconoclasts:

**Myth #1: The story of Abraham smashing the idols is in the Torah.**

Genesis is virtually silent about Abraham's early years. Nor does it tell us the reason why God chose him. An early version of the idols story is found in the Book of Jubilees (2nd century B.C.E.) 12:12-14. The fully embellished story was included in *Sefer Hayashar* (12th century C.E.) and *Ma'aseh Abraham* (date uncertain).

**Myth #2: The Israelites deported by the Assyrians are the "Ten Lost Tribes," and their "descendants" can be found today in far-flung Jewish communities.**

According to Assyrian records, 27,290 Israelites were deported after Samaria fell to Sargon II in 722 B.C.E. Peoples the world over have claimed descent from these tribes. There were not, in fact, ten distinct tribes in Israel at the time of Sargon the Assyrian, and the exiles were lost only in the sense that they were absorbed wherever they were transplanted. Probably only a few of the descendants of the Israelite exiles remained true to the God and the land of Israel and managed, nearly a century and a half later, to join with the exiles of Judah.

**Myth #3: Jewish women in late antiquity, hemmed in by rabbinic patriarchy, played no role in public religious life.**

Material evidence from Diaspora communities

suggests a more fluid social environment than talmudic descriptions. For example, inscriptions tell us that in many communities women served as heads of synagogues and were often among their financial benefactors. Significantly, there is no evidence for the physical separation of men and women in the ancient synagogue. Even the rabbinic world was hardly monolithic. While some are quick to quote Rabbi Eliezer's dictum, "Whoever teaches his daughter Torah teaches her nonsense," they often omit Ben Azzai's conflicting pronouncement, in the same passage, that a man is obligated to teach his daughter Torah (*B.T. Sotah* 20a).

**Myth #4: Jewish life in Eretz Israel came to an end (and the Diaspora began) with the destruction of the Second Temple.**

While the destruction of the Second Temple was a key event in Jewish history, it did not bring about the Dispersion. From the 3rd century B.C.E. on, more Jews resided outside of Eretz Israel than within its boundaries. Nor did the destruction signal an end to Jewish life in Palestine. Rabbinic culture flourished until the 5th century, culminating in the editing of the Mishnah and the Jerusalem Talmud.

**Myth #5: The vast majority of Jews in Spain departed in 1492 rather than undergo forced conversion to Christianity.**

Perhaps 40,000 Jews left Spain, while the vast majority accepted conversion. Some who remained became crypto-Jews (Marranos), while many other converts appear to have been sincere. There is also no evidence that Christopher Columbus was a crypto-Jew, although, at least five of his crew mates were most likely of Jewish extraction, including his interpreter, Louis de Torres.

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# Words on Words

Words are essential at moments of creation and of destruction. We create landscapes of the mind with words, and with them we destroy hopes and dreams. With simple words, God created the world. We speak in our dreams; we use words to pray, teach, learn, share, and encounter the world.

With this issue, Sh'ma is inaugurating a new column – Words on Words. Every other month, a guest columnist will explore a Hebrew word or phrase that defies easy translation, that is multifaceted in meaning, and whose understanding offers us more than a mere definition.

This month, I'd like to welcome Dr. Joel Hoffman, who teaches the history of Hebrew language and translation theory at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in New York. — S.B.

We start our story of words with the story of the word “word” — דָּבָר [davar] — and with it its long and curious history. The root ד.ב.ר [d.v.r], which gives us דָּבָר [davar], may originally have been an imitative root meaning “buzzing,” — giving us דְּבוּרָה [d'vorah] “bee,” — before coming to mean “communicate” and then “speak.” (A different root with the same letters progressed in meaning from “be behind” to “drive from behind” to “lead” to “subjugate” to “destroy,” and shows up in the idiom יִדְבֵר עַמִּים [yadber amim] “[God] will subjugate nations” seen in Psalms 18:47 and 47:4; in II Chronicles 22:10, where וַתְּדַבֵּר [vat'daber] means “she led”; and in the Modern Hebrew מְדַבֵּר [madbir] “exterminator.” It is probably this second root that gives us מִדְּבָר [midbar] “desert,” and דֵּבֵר [dever] “blight,” and it may even be behind דְּבוּרוֹת [dovrot] “rafts,” that is, things behind the ship, in I Kings 5:23; and דְּבִיר [dvir], the hindmost or innermost sanctum of the Temple. All of these roots might even have something in common, bridged by a connection between “spokesperson” and “leader.”)

At any rate, דִּבֵּר [diber] means “spoke,” and so a דָּבָר [davar] is that which is spoken, “a word,” and also that which is spoken about, “a thing.” (Speaking of things, our English word “thing” similarly comes from a word meaning “discussion.”)

Among the most famous sets of words are the ten commandments, collectively called דְּבָרִים [d'varim]

[d'varim] in Exodus, and עֲשֵׂרֵת הַדְּבָרִים [aseret ha-d'varaim] in Mishnah Tamid 5:1. (When these 10 words became the foundation of our law, they followed backwards the path of the English word “word”: “word” comes from the Sanskrit “vratam” meaning “law.”) The common appellation עֲשֵׂרֵת הַדְּבָרוֹת [aseret hadibrot] contains not the plural of דָּבָר [davar], but comes from the plural of a similar word, דִּבֵּר [diber], first found in Jeremiah 5:13, but not commonly used until much later. At first it too meant “word,” and then later came to mean “commandment.”

And among the most famous “things” are the mysterious ones after which the story of the Binding of Isaac takes place. Though we are told that it was “After these things...” — דְּבָרִים [d'varim] — we do not know which things they might be. But surely God knows, for a few verses earlier we read that no thing — דָּבָר [davar] — is beyond Adonai.

Proverbs 10:19 warns us that too many דְּבָרִים [d'varim] cause offense, while Proverbs 24:26 counters that the one who responds with the right דְּבָרִים [d'varim] gets a kiss.

And let us not forget Hosea's plea — קְחוּ עִמָּכֶם דְּבָרִים וְשׁוּבוּ אֵלֶיהָ [k'chu imachem d'varim v'shuvu el adonai] — “take words with you and return to God.”

And so דָּבָר [davar], reminiscent of a buzzing bee, is a word and a thing, a condemnation and a consolation, a mystery and a path to God. And that's quite a thing for a word to be.

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