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The Dangling *Nun*, or Moses and the Case of the Smashed Infant: A Study in Midrashic Intertextuality

There is a suspended letter *nun* nestled deep in the biblical Book of Judges. It winks out from a rather mundane verse: "and Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of מנשה Ma[n]asseh, he and his sons were priests to the tribe of the Danites" (Judges 18:30).[1] The *nun* obfuscates the identity of Jonathan's grandfather: without it, the name reads "Moses," while with it, the grandfather is "Manasseh." The surface-level effect of the suspended *nun* is to raise a textual curiosity: is Jonathan's grandfather Moses or Manasseh? But the Sages[2] saw more than a veiled identity. For them, this diminutive *nun* looms large. This dangling letter signaled a broader interpretive opportunity— an invitation to trace patterns across the biblical narrative. Through their midrashic reading of this verse, and of the story in which it appears, they uncover surprising associations that stretch from the Exodus to the rise of David—associations that continue to resonate today.[3]

The Bible is "fraught with background."[4] Much of the Bible's subtext is, at most, implied. That leaves a lot of space for rabbinic creativity and associations, and

1 For the basis of this Masoretic tradition, see Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible: An Introduction* (2nd ed.), [Heb.] (Jerusalem: 1997), 45.

2 "Sages" in this article refer to the rabbis whose collective scholarship has been redacted into the canon known as "rabbinic literature." This corpus includes writings from the Talmudic era through the early medieval period (later works, such as the 11th c. *Yalkut Shimoni* or the 13th c. *Midrash HaGadol*, are considered compilations of earlier traditions). The term does not refer to medieval or later commentators, such as Rashi.

3 This article reflects an approach that views *midrash* as a legitimate interpretive lens for understanding the biblical text. Through this lens, *midrash* reveals a multi-vocal conversation among the Sages— one that can contribute to a coherent theological and narrative reading of Scripture. For a further exploration of a contemporary scholar whose work exemplifies this approach, see Yaakov Beasley, "The Methodology of Creativity: A Review of Rav Yaakov Medan's Contribution to the Modern Study of Tanakh," *Tradition* 45:1 (2012), 61–77.

4 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953), 9.

the *midrash* provides alternative after alternative. The Sages do not insist on any one singular approach to addressing textual problems. Rather, the multiplicity of possible interpretations underscores the essential mystery of the Bible, and keeps any definitive meaning always out of reach. The Sages are careful to preserve varied—even contradictory—versions and alternatives of *midrash*, because each version illuminates a different aspect of truth, with no one version ever presenting an exhaustive truth. As the Sages themselves explained: "There are seventy faces to the Torah" (*Numbers Rabbah*, 13:16), and "Both these and these are the words of the Living God" (Eruvin 13b). The differing midrashic traditions are not separate, unrelated exegetical strains. Rather, *midrash* is a shared work of complex interconnectedness, a meandering conversation among the Sages that can be read systematically, together forming a collective corpus. Exploring the intertextuality of *midrash*—the way in which different *midrashim* from different contexts sometimes align and play with each other, and when seen together form an emergent pattern—is the next step in achieving a more nuanced, mature, and sophisticated understanding of the deeper concept that the Sages tease out from the Bible.

While my journey into exploring one of these underlying concepts was triggered by the suspended *nun*, there were other, more obvious textual triggers that I discovered along the way. In other words: it was the echo (the dangling *nun*), not the shout (the obvious textual parallel to another biblical context), that led to a startling insight into a rather strange biblical story. In the telling of this exercise, I faithfully chart my disordered process—first, the *midrashim*, and only then, the intertextuality of two biblical stories—simply to honor the fact that Torah need not be learned linearly. In the spirit of Rav Yaakov Medan's approach which "strongly reject[s] any division between *peshat* and *derash*, [rather] understands the relationship between them as symbiotic, each text providing fertile grounds for interpreting the other,"[5] I present the thesis as it unfolded.

The dangling *nun* that prompted my curiosity is in a verse that appears rather late in the Book of Judges, deep within the story of Micah the Ephramite (chapters 17-18). Micah's story comes right after the four-chapter Samson saga. His tale launches the last five chapters of Judges in an entirely new direction, breaking from the established pattern of the book. Until this point, a series of *shoftim,* or saviors, have come to redeem Israel from oppressive enemies. Micah's story is the first example that is brought to illustrate the tenor and concept of the era of Judges, encapsulated in an expression that is repeated throughout the closing chapters of the book: "In those

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5   Beasley, "The Methodology of Creativity," 66 (above, n 3).

days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was proper (*yashar*) in his eyes" (Judges 17:6).[6]

The story (Judges 17) opens *in medias res* with Micah, age indeterminable, confessing to his mother that he has stolen from her a sizable sum of money. We sense he owns up to his crime out of fear of the curse that he reports she has leveled on the thief. Micah's mother quickly calls off the curse and seeks his redemption by immediately blessing him.

Micah returns the full sum, and his mother announces that the money is now consecrated to God. Though the reader, used to the soaring sagas of national saviors, is already discomfited at having been thrust abruptly into a minor family drama, here is where things take a truly weird turn: though the money is consecrated expressly to God, the mother instructs Micah to fashion "an idol and a graven image from the silver *shekalim* that she returned to him" (17:3).[7] She herself brings some of the money to the local smith, who provides her with the idols.[8] At some point, Micah erects a "House of God," and installs his new idols alongside two additional cultic accoutrements that he had commissioned.[9] In a final flourish, he inaugurates his own son as priest. This bizarre backstory to Micah's *Bet Elohim* is capped off with the descriptive catchphrase mentioned above which characterizes the pre-monarchial era: "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was proper (*yashar*) in his eyes" (Judges 17:6).

The consistent interplay of faithfulness to God (whose name appears three times in the first three verses, including as the theophoric addition Micah*yahu*) with straight-up idolatry betrays the intense confusion of the times. Micah is a thief, yet he is religious and even pious. He dedicates a House of God, yet installs graven images and cultic icons. His mother invokes God's Name, yet commissions idols. She solemnly consecrates the returned money to God, yet only hands over a small fraction to the

6   This catchphrase appears in various forms an additional three times throughout the last four chapters of Judges (18:1, 19:1, 21:25).

7   The Bible expressly and repeatedly prohibits the carving or fashioning of any graven image or cultic accoutrement and its worship. Exodus 20:3-5, Leviticus 19:4, 26:1, Deuteronomy 4:16-19, 5:7-9, 27:15.

8   *Metzudat David* suggests that since Micah was tainted by the theft, he did not want to hold on to the money and returned it to her. She herself then follows through with the missive that she had prescribed for Micah. That only some of the money is handed over to the smith, though all of it had been consecrated, is a textual oddity addressed in various ways by the classical commentaries.

9   In the timeline suggested by the Malbim, Micah decides to build his *Bet Elohim* to house his mother's gift, after which he commissions the *ephod* and *teraphim*, and then installs his son as priest.

smith. All these contradictions led the R. Eliezer to declare: 'When it comes to Micah, some divine names are not sacred, while others are sacred" (Shevu'ot 35b). In Micah's day, the name of God, and the name of idols, were interchangeable, almost to the point of being indistinguishable.

It is in this confusing climate that the story picks up with a wandering Levite chancing upon Micah's house, a detail which is necessary to untangling the mystery of the suspended *nun*:

> There was a young man from Bethlehem of Judah, from the clan seat of Judah; he was a Levite and had resided there as a sojourner. This man had left the town of Bethlehem of Judah to take up residence wherever he could find a place. On his way, he came to the house of Micah in the hill country of Ephraim….
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> "Stay with me," Micah said to him, "and be a father and a priest to me, and I will pay you ten shekels of silver a year, an allowance of clothing, and your food." …
>
> The Levite agreed to stay with the man, and the youth became like one of his own sons. Micah inducted the Levite, and the young man became his priest and remained in Micah's house.
>
> "Now I know," Micah told himself, "that God will make me prosper, since the Levite has become my priest." (Judges 17:7-13)

A time after the Levite is happily ensconced in Micah's household, some men from the tribe of Dan stop in at Micah's idolatrous shrine. They recognize the Levite,[10] and poach him from Micah to serve in their idolatrous temple installed in their newly conquered northern territory (they steal Micah's idols, too).[11] Only at the very end of Micah's story is the Levite identified by name: "Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Ma[n]asseh, he and his sons were priests to the tribe of the Danites until the day of the captivity of the land" (Judges 18:30).

This sort of storytelling is typical of the biblical narrative: rich in detail, with abundant textual lacunae and enigmas. (Who is Micah? What happens to the rest of the money that his mother had consecrated to God? Why does Micah's name abruptly change from Micahyahu to Micah? Why does Micah's mother commission idols, and why does Micah then follow suit by fashioning idols of his own? What motivated the Levite to leave his home, and why the repetition of Bethlehem, Judah as his hometown? Why are the Danites so insistent that Micah's idols and priest join them in their new territory? This is a small sampling of the unanswered questions that the text leaves hanging.) The textual oddities are an integral part of the biblical narrative

10   18:3.
11   18:19.

technique, inviting readers in, demanding interpretation. There is much intrigue around Micah and his mother, the idolatrous accoutrements and Micah's shrine, the Danite men and their plunder, the preponderance of tribal identifications and odd details. But since it was the suspended *nun* that started this inquiry, we'll limit our investigation at present to the personalities in that single verse, and their bearing on the story.

Consider how the Sages address the strange textual element of the dangling mini *nun,* which can be read either [with the *nun*] as Manasseh (Menashe מנשה) or [without the *nun*] as Moses (Moshe משה):

> …wasn't Jonathan his name, as it is stated: "And Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh, he and his sons were priests to the tribe of the Danites" (Judges 18:30)? [Rava bar Rav Ḥanan] said to him: And according to your reasoning is it so that he was the son of Manasseh? But wasn't he the son of Moses, as it is written: "The sons of Moses: Gershom and Eliezer" (I Chronicles 23:15)? Rather, because he acted like Manasseh [the king of Judah, who was notorious for idol worship], the verse linked him to Manasseh [by calling him "the son of Manasseh"]. (Bava Batra 109b)[12]

This *midrash* builds intrigue around this secondary character: is he brand-new on the scene, or does he have a backstory? For the Sages, the *nun* isn't the only trigger to digging deeper into the Levite's background. It is also the dramatic delay in naming the Levite which implies that his identity is momentous. What is more, linking this figure with the historic context of the future "captivity of the land" indicates that this Levite and his descendants play a part in a saga that the Sages suggest scopes forward in history, as we shall see later on.

Suddenly, this character takes on new significance, and the Sages look for his backstory. They find it with Gershom, the name of Jonathan's father, a name familiar to us from the Book of Exodus:

> And she [Tzipporah] bore a son, and [Moses] called his name Gershom; for he said: "I have been a stranger in a strange land." (Exodus 2:22)

Now our isolated tale becomes layered with associations. Jonathan was the son of the Gershom, the only Gershom up until now: Gershom, son of Moses. Suddenly, this

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12   See also Rashi 18:30, Radak 17:7. The LXX version does away with the *nun* entirely, and preserves the tradition that Jonathan was the grandson of Moses. For an alternative suggestion as to the identity of Manasseh as a Samaritan priest, see S. Weitzman, "Reopening the Case of the Suspiciously Suspended Nun in Judges 18:30," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 61:3 (July 1999), 448-460.

young Levite is no random, anonymous fortune seeker—he is the grandson of Moses himself!

The *midrash* acknowledges that the text is elusive regarding this lineage. The built-in ambiguity (Manasseh? Moses?) serves to distance Moses from his grandson, since Jonathan's behavior was more in line with the infamous idolator king Manasseh[13] than with his righteous grandfather. Yet the *midrash*'s basic claim is that this Levite is distinguished, bearing the most prestigious pedigree imaginable. With Moses suddenly involved, the story reads differently.

Once the figure of Moses is introduced, certain problems are resolved. For instance, the reason why Micah is so eager to recruit the Levite becomes clear, as does his conviction that Jonathan will bring blessing to his household. Likewise, the question of how the Danites (foreigners to Bethlehem of Judah) recognize the Levite's voice is also resolved. Jonathan is, after all, the scion of a famous family, a celebrity of sorts—even the Danites are familiar with him.

Exposing the identity of Micah's Levite as Moses' grandson telescopes time and links narratives. With Moses thus roped into the Micah story, we may consider a different *midrash*, also linking the two characters, which seems to further this emergent pattern. This second *midrash* suggests that one man existed only because of the other:

> This man was called "Micah" (מיכה) because he was crushed [*nitmakhmekh* נתמכמך] in the buildings of Egypt, where [the Egyptians would place Jewish babies] instead of bricks.
>
> When Moses challenged God, "why have you dealt badly with this people?" (Exodus 5: 22), the Holy One said to him, "I am burning away the thorns, for I know that if they would live, they would be evildoers. If you want, try to save one."
>
> Moses went and saved one [of the babies], and he [grew up] to be Micah. (Rashi, Sanhedrin 101b)[14]

In this outrageous origin story, the infant Micah was born into the horrors of Egyptian captivity, condemned by Pharoah's decree to be crushed into mortar in service of building Egypt. Moses intervened, and despite God's warning he insisted on saving him.

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13 King Manasseh only appears much later in the biblical narrative, in II Kings 21. To the rabbinic mind, a textual allusion to a character that does not yet exist is not problematic. Manasseh's infamy is such that it can scope backwards in time in service of describing other evil, idolatrous characters.

14 Rashi's source is unknown, though the *Tanḥuma* preserves the detail that Micah was being crushed into building material, and Moses saved him from the among the bricks (*Tanḥuma Ki Tisa* 19).

Moses's project ended up exactly as God had foretold: a nasty thorn embedded in Israel. The midrashic motif of Micah-as-idolator winds its way through the parting of the Reed Sea:

> Micah's idol crossed the Reed Sea along with the rest of Israel. (*Meḥilta Bo* 12:41)

Again, during the Israelite encampment at the foot of Sinai:

> Micah stole the shard on which Moses had inscribed, "Arise, bull!" [in order to raise Joseph's coffin].
>
> When Moses was delayed descending the mountain, [Aaron gathered all the Israelite jewelry and threw it into a furnace]. Micah threw the shard into the furnace, and a calf emerged, lowing and leaping. They began to cry: "These are your gods, O Israel!" (Exodus 32:4). (*Tanḥuma Ki Tisa* 19)

His penchant for idolatry culminates in our chapter:

> Now the man Micah had a house of God; he had made an *ephod* and *teraphim* and he had inducted one of his sons to be his priest. (Judges 17:5)

According to the *midrash*, it further extends into the distant future, into the age of the "captivity of the land" (Judges 18:30):

> King Manasseh [of Judah] was exiled to Babylon, and Micah's idol went with him. (*Seder Olam* 24)

Idols in Egypt, the Golden Calf, graven images in *Eretz Israel* and beyond: all of these can be traced back to Moses' fight to save Micah.

These *midrashim* intertwine the figure of Moses with Micah. It was Moses who gives Micah life, and his presence continues to reverberate throughout Micah's life. Separate midrashic strains (the Levite whom Micah hires is Moses' grandson; Micah's life is saved by Moses) together reinforce one central theme: Micah is inexorably linked to Moses.

As noted above, the intertextuality of *midrash*—the relationships between different *midrashim*, each grounded in distinct textual anchors and addressing varied issues—is one way of uncovering broad patterns that weave together disparate biblical narratives and personalities. For instance, the dangling *nun* became the catalyst for drawing Moses into the story of Micah. The wordplay on Micah's name ("crushed") served as an entry point to further connect him to Moses through his origin story. Both *midrashim* prompt us to consider these two figures—separated by time and context— within the same interpretive matrix.

With the *nun* removed and Moses brought into view, the text came alive with linguistic resonance. I began to notice what perhaps I should have seen even before the *nun* called attention to itself: an inner-biblical allusion. The language used to describe

the Levite's decision—ויואל הלוי לשבת את האיש (*va-yoel ha-levi la'shevet et ha-ish*, "the Levite agreed to stay with the man," Judges 17:11)—is nearly identical to the verse about Moses' sojourn in Jethro's home: ויואל משה לשבת את האיש (*va-yoel Moshe la'shevet et ha-ish*, "Moses agreed to stay with the man," Exodus 2:21). It is clear that the verse in Judges echoes the one in Exodus. This parallel—though only obvious to me after the *midrashim* had oriented my thinking toward Moses—serves as the textual anchor for the midrashic linking of Micah and Moses. Moreover, I suggest that the deliberate choice of this particular verse points to a deeper rationale for pairing these two figures conceptually.

The rare word *va-yoel*—translated here as "agreed," but more often used in contexts of vow-making—dominates both parallel verses and may hold the key to understanding the conceptual association between Moses and Micah. The Sages assign grave weight to the first use of *va-yoel*—Moses' *va-yoel*—embedding it with profound theological and narrative significance.

According to a *midrash* (*Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael, Yitro, Amalek* 1), when Moses sought Tzipporah's hand in marriage, Jethro imposed a condition: "Only if you accept my terms. Your firstborn must be educated in all religions and introduced to every god. Do as you will with your other children." Moses agreed. Jethro pressed further: "Swear it." Moses swore. The *midrash* reads *va-yoel Moshe la'shevet et ha-ish* (Exodus 2:21) as an oath—an act of binding assent.

This *midrash* signals that Moses' *va-yoel* involved more than enthusiasm for marriage—it implied a willingness to allow his own child to be exposed to idolatrous practice. The thematic overlap between this narrative and others is striking. One *midrash* identifies the idolatrous Micah as the infant Moses once saved. Another identifies the Levite priest who leads idol worship in Judges 17 as Moses' own grandson. In all three cases, Moses is present at the inception of a story in which children—Micah, Gershom, and Jonathan[15]—become enmeshed in idolatry.

Thus, *va-yoel* becomes a powerful textual and conceptual bridge between the stories of Moses and Micah, with idolatry as the shared nexus. The common thread running through these episodes is Moses' willingness to allow a dangerous force—idolatry—to persist into the next generation of Israel. Rather than crushing that threat at its root, Moses permits it to cross into Israelite history. He rescues the infant Micah, the same Micah who later carries his idol through the sea, instigates the Golden Calf, and erects an idolatrous shrine in the land. Moses allows that threat to continue its

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15   Jonathan is repeatedly called a *na'ar* (young man) (Judges 17:7,11,12; 18:3,15).

trajectory. In a similar act, he enables Jethro to dictate Gershom's spiritual education—again, allowing the seed of foreign worship to take root within his own family.

In both stories, Moses' decisions express a kind of faithfulness to present relationships or circumstances—even at the cost of exposing the future to theological and moral risk.

One way to understand the conceptual thread underlying these two *midrashim* is to consider that Moses' approach to idolatry may have been more nuanced than simple rejection or prohibition. Perhaps he believed that idolatry's power could be undermined not only through direct confrontation but also through exposure. If left to unfold naturally, idolatry would eventually reveal itself as hollow and ineffectual. His tolerance in these cases, then, was not a sign of passivity, but an expression of faith that truth would ultimately prevail when falsehood was given enough room to collapse under its own weight.[16]

Moses' decisions to tolerate idolatry—both within his family and within the broader community of Israel—had far-reaching consequences. The second use of *va-yoel*, in the Micah saga, reflects the unfolding implications of those earlier choices: his act of saving Micah, and his consent to expose his son Gershom to pagan education. These decisions appear to culminate in a deeply troubling outcome—his grandson Jonathan's transformation from a Levite into an idolatrous priest. On the surface, this might seem like a damning indictment of Moses' judgment.[17]

Yet the Sages do not frame Jonathan's defection as a straightforward case of moral failure passed down from grandfather to grandson. Nor do they present Moses' "appearance" in the Micah narrative as a cautionary tale about the perils of permissive parenting or exposure to the forbidden. Instead, they interpret Jonathan's path as a

16   This reading finds a parallel in Maimonides' account of Abraham's spiritual awakening. Like Moses, Abraham was raised in a world saturated with idolatry. Yet through persistent inquiry and reflection, he arrived at the recognition of a single divine Creator—not through abrupt rejection, but through a gradual, reasoned process. As Maimonides describes it: "Once Abraham was weaned, he began to explore and reflect with his mind. Though he was still a child, he thought incessantly by day and night, wondering: How is it possible that this celestial sphere moves continuously without someone guiding it? Who is causing it to revolve? It cannot be that it revolves on its own…" (*Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Avodat Kokhavim* 1:1–3). Maimonides is drawing from a rich midrashic tradition. For a comprehensive list of rabbinic and other ancient sources on this tradition, see Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* (Jewish Publication Society: 1954), I:189, 212-213, V:210 (n16), 217(n49).

17   This is the view of the *Ba'al ha-Turim* (Exodus 2:16), who interprets the *midrash* to mean that Moses allowed Jethro to educate Gershom as he saw fit in the hope of ultimately drawing his father-in-law closer to God. However, Moses was later punished with a descendant who became an idolater.

misreading—a distorted echo—of his grandfather's complex approach to handling idolatry. Jonathan reflects not Moses' failure, but the unresolved tension in Moses' legacy:

> [The Danites were shocked that it was Jonathan serving as a priest.] "And they turned aside there and said to him: 'Who brought you here [*halom*], and what [*ma*] are you doing in this place, and what do you have here [*po*]?'" (Judges 18:3). They asked him: Do you not come from Moses?… Shall you become a priest for idol worship!?
>
> Jonathan said to them: This is the tradition that I received from the house of my father's father: A person should hire himself out to *avoda zara* (idol worship) rather than throw himself on the mercies of flesh and blood [by requesting charity].
>
> He had thought that the tradition meant actual *avoda zara* (idolatry, lit. "worship of the strange") but that is not so. Rather [the intent was the literal meaning of the words]: *avoda she-zara lo* [work or worship that was distant, strange, or foreign to his sensibilities or preferences]. As Rav said to Rav Kahana, his student: Skin a carcass in the market and take payment, but do not say: I am a great man and this matter is beneath me. (Bava Batra 110a)

Beyond emphasizing the importance of self-reliance, this *midrash* also functions to diminish the significance of idolatry in Jonathan's eyes. For him, it was simply a means of livelihood—and thus, in his mind, justified. It was the "honest work" that Moses had encouraged over accepting handouts. While Jonathan may have misunderstood Moses' intent—mistaking figurative ideals for literal instruction—he nonetheless internalized a key idea: that *avoda zara* (idolatry) could be treated as *avoda she-zara lo*—a service to which he felt no personal attachment. For him, it was just a job. A role to play. A performance—with perks.

The *midrash* cleverly captures Jonathan's cynical pragmatism, showing how he weaponized his enlightened disillusionment to benefit from both worlds. He neither believed in the idol nor respected its worship—but still profited from the pageantry. He had his cake and ate it, too:

> [Jonathan] begrudged the idol. How so? If a man came to sacrifice an ox, a sheep, or a goat to the idol and said: "Make it favorably inclined toward me," [Jonathan] would reply: "What benefit can it offer you? It neither sees nor hears, eats nor drinks, does neither good nor evil, and cannot speak." The worshiper asked, "So what should we do?" Jonathan said, "Go, bring me a wooden bowl full of fine flour and ten eggs, and I will prepare it before the idol,

and it shall eat—and I will make it favorably inclined toward you!" Once the man left, [Jonathan] ate it himself. (*Yerushalmi*, Berakhot 9b)

Jonathan's mockery of idolatry does not stem from iconoclastic zeal but from commodified detachment. He knew the gods were powerless—he said as much—but saw no contradiction in exploiting that knowledge for personal gain.

A related version of the *midrash* sharpens the picture of Jonathan as someone who actively subverted idolatry from within:

> A person would come to worship, and [Jonathan] would ask, "How old are you?" The man would reply, "Forty," or "Fifty," or "Seventy"—whatever his age. Jonathan would then say, "You are well on in years, yet this idol was made only five or twelve years ago. And you would forsake your God to bow to *this*? That's disgraceful." The man would grow embarrassed and leave. On one occasion, a scoundrel came, and Jonathan asked him the same question. The man retorted, "If so, why are *you* sitting here and worshipping it?" Jonathan answered: "I take my salary—and I blind its eyes" [i.e., I sabotage/undermine the idol]. (*Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* 2:5)[18]

These *midrashim* redeem Jonathan, at least partially, from the disgrace of idolatry. He never truly believed in the gods he served; rather, he played the part for the sake of salary and social standing.[19] In subtle ways, he even sought to undermine the very cult he participated in—mocking its logic, embarrassing its adherents, and discouraging others from joining. Jonathan internalized "the tradition that [he] received from the house of his father's father," stripping idolatry of any consequence, reducing it to the mundanity of an honest job. Still, he is tainted by his poor choices.

Jonathan's story is one that begins in Exodus with the pedagogical and ideological decisions made by Moses, is fleshed out in Judges, and continues into the period of Israel's monarchy. Though he doesn't appear by name in either Samuel or Kings, Jonathan is alluded to in the retelling of David's history in the Book of Chronicles. The *midrash* is drawn to a verse in Chronicles that singles out Shebuel, son of Gershom,

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18   Note the obvious similarity to the well-known *midrash* about Abraham's iconoclasm and his attempts to educate potential customers (as well as his father) on the inefficacy of the idols (*Genesis Rabba* 38:13).

19   The notion of playing along with the farce of idolatry for reasons other than belief in the gods' power is found in another midrashic context. When Elijah challenged the Ba'al prophets to offer a sacrifice to their god on Mt. Carmel and prove to Israel that Ba'al heeds their prayers, Hiel of Bethel fashioned a hollow altar. He crawled inside and bade the prophets to give him the signal, at which point he planned to light a fire under the altar so that it would appear to all that Ba'al was consuming the sacrifice. God sent a snake to kill him before he could go through with his scheme. (*Yalkut*, 214).

son of Moses, as one of King David's officers. It is hard to miss the Gershom/Moses connection with our verse in Judges, which leads the Sages to wonder about Shebuel. Could he be Jonathan, even though historically that is near-impossible—how could Jonathan still be alive in David's time? *Midrash*, though, is never constrained by those kinds of considerations. It claims that this verse picks up the thread left off in Judges, and that Shebuel is indeed Jonathan. David, who understood old Shebuel/Jonathan's weakness for accepting shady employment, rehabilitated the Levite's tarnished reputation by giving him truly honest work. Once again, the *midrash* reduces Jonathan's offense from idealistic idolator to avaricious opportunist:

> When King David saw that money was excessively precious to Jonathan, he appointed him as director of the treasuries of the Temple, as it is stated: 'And Shebuel, the son of Gershom, the son of Moses, was ruler over the treasuries' (I Chronicles 26:24).
>
> Was his name really Shebuel—wasn't it Jonathan? R. Yoḥanan says: He is called Shebuel to allude to the fact that he repented and returned to God [*shav la-el*] with all his heart. (Baba Batra 110a)[20]

The encounter in Judges between Micah and the Levite represents a key iteration of a pattern first set in motion by Moses when he saved the idolatrous Micah and permitted Jethro to raise Gershom immersed in foreign religious traditions. One useful framework for understanding this pattern is through considering that perhaps Moses reduced idolatry to insignificance not by denying its allure, but by diminishing its power.[21] He treated it not as a threat to be crushed, but as a spectacle—an empty pageant of symbols undeserving of serious engagement. By tolerating it, he hoped that others would eventually see through it, move beyond it, and lose interest. He rescued Micah, allowed Gershom to pursue his education in comparative religion, and played the long game. In that light, Jonathan's theatrical "idol worship" reads less as a betrayal and more as a misfire—an exaggerated expression of Moses' own strategy. It was a parody born of inheritance. Jonathan's farce was, in effect, a distorted enactment of Moses' deeply reductive approach to *avoda zara*.

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20   Also J. Sanhedrin 11:5. *Shir HaShirim Rabba* 2:5 identifies Jonathan as the old prophet living in Beth-el in I Kings 13:11.

21   The same approach of exposing the impotence of pagan gods rather than denying their existence is alluded to in the verse "And against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments—I am the Lord" (Exodus 12:12). The *midrash* expands on the concept of disempowerment rather than denial, claiming that the plagues were a polemical attack on the Egyptian pantheon ("The Holy One, blessed be He, said to strike first at Egypt's gods, and only afterward at the Egyptians themselves" *Tanḥuma Va'era* 13).

Eventually, Moses reasoned, Israel would grow tired of the cheap and hollow satisfaction provided by worship of the *zara*. Eventually, Israel would mature into a true relationship with a God who is wholly Other but never alien, who cannot be contained, yet who can offer real love and faithfulness.

"Eventually" was a long time coming. For many centuries after Moses and Micah, Israel succumbed to the enticements of idols and images in their worship of God. Even now we still need the constant reminder not to fall prey to the allure of false gods, and we are instructed to continue giving Micah's worship house, with all of its temptations, a wide berth:

> And some are careful, when saying the Song of the Sea, to pause slightly between the words *mi kamokha* and *ba-elim*, lest one come to make the mistake of saying "Micah," which was the name of an idolatrous figure. (*Bet Yosef, Oraḥ Ḥayyim* §51, s.v. *ve-yesh omrim le-hashir*)

Back to the *nun* that started this all. A *midrash* on its own can deliver the subtext of a verse or a story, exposing the nuance embedded in the ambiguity or the curiously-worded phrase, in the repeated or the omitted. It can suggest a potential association with other contexts and set us off on a hunt to seek out connections between those contexts. The dangling *nun* was my trigger to thinking more broadly about the Micah story and considering how Moses might somehow be involved. When other midrashim like Micah's origin story come into play—when midrashic analysis advances into the intertextual—then the pattern becomes more complex, more intriguing. And when the text itself directs us back to Moses through the near-identical *va-yoel* verses, we have perhaps the most important piece of the puzzle.

The conceptual connection between Moses and Jonathan hinges on the meaning embedded in that first *va-yoel*, which the *midrash* interprets as Moses' willingness to expose Gershom to idolatry. That same willingness underlies the Micah origin story as well: Moses is eager to save Micah—even against God's apparent disapproval.

The second *va-yoel* continues this theme in the figure of Jonathan, Moses' descendant, who, like his grandfather, diminishes the power of idolatry not through avoidance but through engagement. By confronting it directly, he exposes its emptiness and ineffectiveness. This exercise in midrashic intertextuality demonstrates how seemingly unrelated *midrashim*—from the tale of the suspended *nun* to the story of the infant saved in the nick of time—can be woven into a single, cohesive idea. Together, they reveal a surprising and profound pattern in how Moses and his descendants related to *avoda zara*: not through fear or destruction, but by rendering it irrelevant.

The consequences of Moses having saved Micah culminate in the era of Judges. Micah's story underlines Israel's confusion about the singularity of God in a milieu which supported many divinities:

> R. Natan says: [The distance] from Gerav [where Micah resided] to Shiloh [where the Tabernacle was at that time] was three *mil*, and the smoke from the altar in Shiloh and the smoke from the worship of the idol of Micah would intermingle with each other. (Sanhedrin 103b)

The intertextual connection between Judges 17:11 and Exodus 2:21—reinforced by a web of midrashic contexts—highlights Moses' complex involvement in shaping a spiritually disorienting and morally ambiguous reality. This is not presented as an indictment of Moses. Rather, both the *peshat* (the textual repetition of *va-yoel*) and the *derash* (including the *midrashim* about the dangling *nun*, the saving of baby Micah, the oath-bound context of the first *va-yoel*, and the portrayal of Jonathan as a cynical opportunist rather than a true idolater) point to Moses' deliberate engagement with the difficult challenge of confronting the appeal of idolatry. When Moses led Israel in the song, "Who is like You among the gods, O Lord?" (Exodus 15:11), he chose language that acknowledged—not denied—the competing claims of divine power. This was the chant he taught Israel[22] as they embarked on their long journey out of Egypt and toward Canaan, a land also steeped in idolatrous temptation. While his ultimate goal was the exclusive worship of the One God, Moses was not naïve. He understood the seductive pull of idolatry and chose to confront it through complexity, not denial.

The deeper insight yielded by this intertextual study of *midrashim* is that Moses inaugurated a pedagogical process: allowing exposure to idolatry not to endorse it, but to deflate it—to dull its mystique—by reducing it to something ordinary and unthreatening. The Sages extend this idea to Jonathan, Moses' grandson, whose irreverent exploitation of idol worship—using it as a source of income—represents a further step in the desacralization of *avoda zara*. More profoundly, this interpretive framework challenges us to consider the value of confronting our own false gods, whatever they may be, even if the path to breaking their hold is slow and difficult.

Ultimately, this exploration demonstrates not only the richness of tracing inner-biblical allusions for thematic resonance, but also the profound insight gained through mapping midrashic interconnections, interconnections that shed light on deeper structures of meaning embedded within the biblical text.

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22   "R. Akiva explained: Israel repeated every word [of the Song] after Moses" (J. Sotah 5:4).