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The Megillah Cycle:
Performative Potential and Affective Power of Hebrew Biblical Texts and Their Associated Embodied Practices

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Satisfaction of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Theatre & Drama

by

Haïa R'nana Bchiri

Committee in Charge:

University of California San Diego

Professor Julie Burelle
Professor Amelia Glaser
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University of California, Irvine

Professor Ian Munro, Chair
Professor Anthony Kubiak

2026

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University of California San Diego/

University of California, Irvine

2026

Dedication

To my grandfather, of blessed memory, who gave me his love of the arts;

My grandmother, who gave me her love of Judaism;

And my mother, who gave me her passion to pair those together.

You raised me in a house of wonderful words;

All those I write are in your honor.

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Special thanks to the Jewish Theological Seminary for granting me access to their incredible library; this work has been immeasurably enriched by texts and objects from their archives.

Vita

2020 Bachelor of Arts in Theatre Arts, Brandeis University

2026 Doctor of Philosophy in Theatre & Drama, University of California San Diego/University of California, Irvine

2024 The Dita and Erwin Gumpel Judaic Studies Endowed Fellowship, University of California San Diego

2024 The Katzin in Perpetuity Fellowship, University of California San Diego

2025 The Dita and Erwin Gumpel Judaic Studies Endowed Fellowship, University of California San Diego

Abstract of the Dissertation

The Megillah Cycle: Performative Potential and Affective Power of Hebrew Biblical Texts and Their Associated Embodied Practices

by

Haïa R'nana Bchiri

Doctor of Philosophy in Theatre & Drama

University of California San Diego/University of California, Irvine, 2026

Professor Ian Munro, Chair

This dissertation explores the heterotopia of the holy-days of *Purim*, *Tisha B'Av*, *Pesach*, and *Shavuot* and their associated *Megillot* through analysis by way of interdisciplinary methodology of performance and Jewish studies; adaptation/translation into this format; and, especially, connecting these texts with their traditions, holidays, and rituals; all coalescing to provide strong evidence of this performative potential. Can these *Megillot* and their associated embodied practices be reframed through the lens of performance, and in doing so can the capability of these combined texts and contexts offer support for Jewish communities in crisis? Building on the likes of Shimon Levy (*The Bible as Theatre*) and Terry Giles and William J. Doan (*The Naomi Story – the Book of Ruth: From Gender to Politics*), I aim to reexamine these four *Megillot* through a theatrical lens, investigating their performative potential. Expanding on the work of my predecessors, I pair close and comparative analysis of the texts with the embodiment that is embedded in Jewish religious and cultural practices connected to their associated ancient, ongoing holy-days. For this project, "*The Megillah Cycle*: Performative Potential and Affective Power of Hebrew Biblical Texts and Their Associated Embodied Practices," I tease out threads of Jewish history and persisting practice and weave them together in a tapestry that can be actively, affectively engaged and applied to aid us in the current chapter of Jewish history. By doing so, I hope to also provide a bridge to bring the liberating, encouraging, and unifying power of these texts and practices into the rest of the year, combatting the pitfall of the reversals and releases of the carnivalesque lasting only as long as the festivals. I seek to find new answers to the question of what it means to observe the commandment of retelling our history "as if you were there" – and to use them to write a brighter next chapter.

Introduction

Chronology

~970 BCE: Estimated start to the reign of King Shlomo.[1] While his father, David, was best known for his military prowess, King Shlomo becomes famous for his wisdom and (perhaps resultant) peaceful reign. He helms the building of the *Beit HaMikdash*, the First Temple.[2] This is the first permanent structure for worship in Israelite history and stood for almost 400 years.

6th century BCE: Thespis, considered the father of Greek drama, lives and works in Athens, supposedly staging the first tragedy during the City Dionysia in 534 BCE.[3]

597 BCE: Conquest of the Kingdom of Judea by the Babylonians. The Babylonians, as part of their violent invasion, raze the First Temple, leaving only the Western Wall standing. They send many Israelites into exile: the First Diaspora begins. Jews who are allowed to remain regroup in smaller communities around the now-Babylonian colony of Israel. *Eicha* commemorates this invasion and destruction. *Tisha B'Av* practices first emerge.[4]

5th century BCE: The Persian Empire rises and replaces the Babylonians as the dominant power in the region. *Esther* is set during this period and might have been written during this time.

516 BCE: The Second *Beit HaMikdash*/Temple is built and Israel is once again a Jewish kingdom. Following an invasion by the Hellenes, the would-be colonizers attempt to outlaw the Jewish faith and forcibly convert the populace. Led by the Hasmonean brothers (members of the priestly class), the Jews repel the invaders in what would become known as the story of *Hanukkah*. Once peace is restored, the surviving Hasmoneans establish a new royal dynasty,

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[1] Solomon
[2] Green, Alberto R. "Solomon and Siamun: A Synchronism between Early Dynastic Israel and the Twenty-First Dynasty of Egypt." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 97, no. 3, 1978, 355.
[3] "Thespis." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*m https://www.britannica.com/biography/Thespis-Greek-poet.
[4] Waskow, Arthur. "Spring Fever – Purim." *Seasons of Our Joy: A Modern Guide to the Jewish Holidays*. Beacon Press, 1982, 208.

uniting the religious and political branches of Jewish government.[5] Jewish artisans travel the Mediterranean Basin, further opening the door for creative exchange.[6]

c. 550-330 BCE: Likely composition of *Rut*.[7]

c. 490 BCE: Aeschylus's *The Suppliant Maidens* is produced in Athens.[8]

4th century BCE: Likely composition of *Esther*.[9] Early *Purim* practices.

450 BCE: Aeschylus writes *The Oresteia* trilogy.[10]

c. 442-441 BCE: Sophocles writes *Ajax*.[11]

408 BCE: Euripides's play, *The Bacchae*, is brought back to Athens following his death.[12]

3rd century BCE: Likely composition of *Shir HaShirim*.[13]

Between 3rd century BCE and 1st century CE: The Dead Sea Scrolls are written and preserved in the Qumran Caves. The scrolls contain the entire Israelite/Jewish biblical canon, as well as some apocryphal material, and are among the oldest surviving complete biblical documents. *Shavuot* practices begin to evolve from centering the harvest to centering *Torah* study.[14]

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[5] Pairman Brown, John. "Divine Kingship, Civic Institutions, and Imperial Rule." *Ancient Israel and Ancient Greece: Religion, Politics, and Culture*. Fortress Press, 2003, 51 and 71.
[6] Pairman Brown, John. "From Particularity to Universalism." *Ancient Israel and Ancient Greece: Religion, Politics, and Culture*. Fortress Press, 2003, 210.
[7] Grabbe, Lester L. *The History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period, Volume 1: Yehud, the Persian Province of Judah*. Continuum, 2004, 105.
[8] Aeschylus. *Suppliant Maidens*, translated by S. G. Benardete. Washington Square Press, 1967, 2.
[9] Taha, Ilana. "The Book of Esther and the Jewish Festival of Purim." The British Library, 9 March 2017, https://www.bl.uk/stories/blogs/posts/the-book-of-esther-and-the-jewish-festival-purim.
[10] Aeschylus. *The Oresteia*, translated by E. D. A. Morshead. Dover Publication, 1996, v.
[11] Moore, John. "Introduction to *Ajax*." *Sophocles II*. Edited by David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, The University of Chicago Press, 1957, 2.
[12] Arrowsmith, William. "Introduction to *The Bacchae*." *Euripides V*. Edited by David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, University of Chicago Press, 1959, 142.
[13] Hunt, Patrick. *Poetry in the Song of Songs: A Literary Analysis*. Peter Lang, 2008, 5.
[14] Waskow, Arthur. "Spring Fever – Purim." *Seasons of Our Joy: A Modern Guide to the Jewish Holidays*. Beacon Press, 1982, 190.

70 CE Conquest and destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. The Second Diaspora begins with the forced exile of Jews by the conquering Romans. Diasporic practices centering the community and synagogue shift to the center of Jewish life.[15]

132-136 CE: The Bar Kokhva Revolt. Sometime after this, *Tisha B'Av* practices are more firmly established.[16]

Early 5th century CE: The Jerusalem Talmud is compiled in the Galilee.[17]

5th-6th centuries CE: The Babylonian Talmud is compiled and edited.[18] Diasporic *Purim*, *Pesach*, and *Shavuot* practices established.[19]

1040-1105 CE: Biblical exegete Rashi (Rav Shlomo Yitzchaki) is born in France and goes on to compose the collection of commentary on the Hebrew biblical canon and the Talmud that becomes a cornerstone of Jewish text study.[20]

~1550 CE: Joseph Caro finds refuge from the Spanish Inquisition among the Jews who remained in Israel and others who returned. There, in *Tzfat*, he finishes the *Shulhan Aruh*, a codification of Jewish law.[21]

1720 CE: George Frideric Handel composes an adaptation of *Esther* as an oratorio.[22]

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[15] Cohen, Shaye J. D. "The Temple and the Synagogue." *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, edited by William Horbury, W. D. Davies, and John Sturdy, Cambridge University Press, 1999, 298.
[16] Waskow, Arthur. "Spring Fever – Purim." *Seasons of Our Joy: A Modern Guide to the Jewish Holidays*. Beacon Press, 1982, 209.
[17] Schiffman, Lawrence. "The Sea of the Talmud." *From Text to Tradition: A History of Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism*. KTAV Publishing House, 1991, 227.
[18] Eisenberg, Ronald L. "Torah." *What the Rabbis Said: 250 Topics from the Talmud*. Bloomsburg Publishing, 3 August 2010.
[19] Waskow, Arthur. *Seasons of Our Joy: A Modern Guide to the Jewish Holidays*. Beacon Press, 1982, 116, 136, and 191.
[20] Viezel, Eran. "The Formation of Some Biblical Books, According to Rashi." *The Journal of Theological Studies* 61, no. 1, 2010, 16.
[21] "Joseph ben Ephraim Karo." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Joseph-ben-Ephraim-Karo
[22] Handel, George Frideric, "Esther, a Sacred Oratorio in Score." Score, 1794, [London, England], University of North Texas Libraries, UNT Digital Library, https://digital.library.unt.edu; crediting UNT Music Library, https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc25948/.

1820-1920 CE: The “drama theory” is proposed and proceeds to dominate the discourse surrounding *Shir HaShirim*.[23]

1881 CE: Jews begin to flee to the land of Israel (then an Ottoman territory) from the anti-Jewish legislation and violent pogroms in Eastern Europe. Many purchase land upon arrival, joining the Spanish and MENA Jews already living there, including the descendants of those who never left.[24] Hebrew schools are established and the modern version of the language slowly starts to take shape.[25]

1948 CE: The War of Independence against the British Empire is won, and Jews reestablish indigenous sovereignty in the land of Israel for the first time in 2000 years.

1996 CE: Shimon Levy leads a “Bible as Theatre” workshop in the Negev desert, inviting 25 theatre practitioners and scholars to experiment with performing short excerpts of the Hebrew Bible.[26]

2015 CE: Robert Alter publishes *Strong as Death is Love*, his poetic translation of and commentary on several biblical books, including *Esther*, *Shir HaShirim*, and *Rut*.[27]

2016 CE: Terry Giles and William J. Doan publish *The Story of Naomi – The Book of Ruth: From Gender to Politics*, proposing an oral/embodied origin for *Rut*.

2023 CE: Sight & Sound Theatre stage their spectacular interpretation of *Esther*.[28]

2024 CE: *The Megillah Cycle* workshop and talkback, supported by the Katzin and Gumpel Fellowships.

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[23] Schellenberg, Annette. “The Song of Songs Through the Ages: Introduction.” *The Song of Songs Through the Ages: Essays on the Song’s Reception History in Different Times, Contexts, and Genres*, edited by Annette Shellenberg, Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2023, 8.
[24] Salmon, Yosef. “Ideology and Reality in the Bilu ‘Aliyah.’” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 2, no. 4, 1978, 430 - 431.
[25] Scharfstein, Sol. “The Revival of Hebrew.” *Chronicle of Jewish History: From the Patriarchs to the 21st Century*. KTAV Publishing House, 1997, 231-232.
[26] Levy, Shimon. “Preface.” In *The Bible as Theatre*. Liverpool University Press, 2012, viii.
[27] Alter, Robert. *Strong as Death is Love: The Songs of Songs, Ruth, Esther, Jonah, and Daniel*. W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2015.
[28] “Queen Esther: Live on Stage.” Sight & Sound Theatre, https://www.sight-sound.com/shows/esther.

The Role of the Scrolls

The central question of this project pertains to the puzzle, power, and potential of the *Megillot*, a distinct subcategory of the Hebrew Bible, each of which traditionally is read aloud in congregation on a specific annual holy-day.[29] The *Megillot* under consideration are *Esther*, *Eicha*,[30] *Shir HaShirim*,[31] and *Rut*, which are tied to *Purim*, *Tisha B'Av*, *Pesach*, and *Shavuot* (respectively). The composition of *Eicha* can be dated as far back as 597 BCE,[32] *Rut* between 550-330 BCE,[33] *Esther* to the 5th- 4th centuries BCE,[34] and *Shir HaShirim* to the 3rd century BCE.[35] During this period, the Jewish people are navigating the complexities of re-uniting following the First Diaspora and further threats to their survival, while Jewish artisans navigate their neighboring lands in the Mediterranean Basin.[36] Following the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, the practices surrounding the holy-days associated with the *Megillot* evolved to center increasingly embodied, communal traditions in response to the shifts of the Second Diaspora.[37]

Can these *Megillot* and their associated embodied practices be reframed through the lens of performance, and in doing so can the capability of these combined texts and contexts offer support for Jewish communities in crisis? By engaging with this question, I am entering into a

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[29] I use the broad term "holy-day" rather than "holiday" in this context because one of these days is a fast day centered around collective mourning, which conflicts with the celebratory implications of a "holiday."
[30] *Lamentations* (literally "Why," "How," or "Alas")
[31] *Song of Songs*
[32] Waskow, Arthur. "Spring Fever – Purim." *Seasons of Our Joy: A Modern Guide to the Jewish Holidays*. Beacon Press, 1982, 208.
[33] Grabbe, Lester L. *The History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period, Volume 1: Yehud, the Persian Province of Judah*. Continuum, 2004, 105.
[34] Taha, Ilana. "The Book of Esther and the Jewish Festival of Purim." The British Library, 9 March 2017, https://www.bl.uk/stories/blogs/posts/the-book-of-esther-and-the-jewish-festival-purim.
[35] Hunt, Patrick. *Poetry in the Song of Songs: A Literary Analysis*. Peter Lang, 2008, 5.
[36] Pairman Brown, John. "From Particularity to Universalism." *Ancient Israel and Ancient Greece: Religion, Politics, and Culture*. Fortress Press, 2003, 210.
[37] Waskow, Arthur. *Seasons of Our Joy: A Modern Guide to the Jewish Holidays*. Beacon Press, 1982, 116, 136, and 191.

conversation with scholars such as Shimon Levy, who has proposed the possibility of adapting fragments of the Hebrew biblical canon as theatre; Robert Alter, who has analyzed Hebrew biblical texts through a literary lens; and Terry Giles and William J. Doan, who proposed an oral history for one of the *Megillot* (*Rut*). I have benefitted from all of their interventions, and will build upon some of their material throughout this project, but I believe there are crucial pieces of the picture missing in each of their works. The overarching innovation I am adding to the conversation is that of investigating performance potential specifically in the combination of the *Megillot* and their associated embodied practices: though they have not historically been understood as such, these four texts can be reframed as performance texts, and the practices of their associated holy-days (including those surrounding the communal readings of the *Megillot*) can be reconfigured as immersive, interactive performances of collective re-membering. By introducing and applying this reframing, I aim to demonstrate the power that the *Megillot* in combination with their holy-days have to function as vehicles for reformation, rebuilding, and/or reification of communal identity during and after a crisis. The historical and cultural contexts from which each *megillah* emerged provides the basis for the texts responding to a specific communal need, all feeding the central questions of collective identity continuity and reformation/reconfiguration catalyzed by the First Diaspora and subsequent regathering in the early Second Temple Period. Over the course of the Second Diaspora, the *Megillot* and their corresponding practices have evolved to serve stacking sources of communal fracturing and grief, but have also stagnated as they became entrenched in their liturgical function. I argue that a theatrical reframing of the *Megillot* and their surrounding rituals can reinvigorate their potential to serve as vehicles for community (re)formation in times of crisis, sources of embodied

connection and communication of values, road maps for actively opting-in to the community, and scripts for coming together through joy and pain.

The performances of my theatrical translations of the *Megillot* helped demonstrate this potential, my test audiences speaking to the activation of texts with which they had engaged from more of a distance when viewing them as works purely to be read rather than embodied. Some felt welcomed into the collective cultivated through embodied engagement with the *Megillot* for the first time, while others felt their sense of belonging to the Jewish community activated and their Jewish values validated. The different *Megillot* provided different kinds of affective activation, such as *Eicha* and *Esther* providing vessels for contemporary griefs and hopes scaffolded on past pains and reversals of fortune. Together, they offered and offer a means to connect and come together in embodied understandings of Jewish communal identity.

Adding to this, I trace a throughline of female figures serving as stand-ins for the Jewish/Israelite people, with their performances of femininity making their bodies into maps for the themes and takeaways of each of the *Megillot* in question that I am proposing can be drawn out through a performance-based reframing. This throughline serves to showcase the inherent performativity woven into these texts and corresponding practices: each of the central female figures in the *Megillot* engages in her own sort of meta-performance that also can be viewed as encapsulating the communal function of each *megillah*: Esther engages with and subverts societal norms in order to turn strife into celebration, Lady Zion mourns deeply in order to provide comfort, the Raaya revels in her love in order to build a brighter future, and Rut tailors her performance of identity in order to actively opt-in to Jewish community.

Through this work, I offer that there is a font of performative power to be found in ritual – that considering the two as one enhances their impacts. The use of embodied characters and

immersive theatrical techniques can belong to ritual performances, serving as sources of activation of those engaging in the rituals: reframing these texts as "performative" in the sense of reconfiguring them as a kind of theatre can enhance their engagement with the second meaning of "performative" in terms of making things happen, in this case the (re)configuration of communal identity in moments of crisis.

The common translations of the central texts' titles as the "Book of Esther," "Book of Ruth," and "Book of Lamentations" are technically mistranslations: in Hebrew, they are titled collectively the "*Megillot*,"[38] with each referred to in the singular possessive "*Megillat*[39] X." The word "*megillah*" literally means "scroll," in contrast to the other parts of the Hebrew biblical canon, which are referred to by the term "*sefer*" or "book." This distinction does not seem to come from the way in which the different texts are recorded, since all of the texts were, and still are, traditionally written on parchment and stored in scrolls, with the phrase "Torah scroll" even being a mistranslation but more accurate depiction of the term "*sefer* Torah." If these *megillot* are not written down in an unusual medium, why draw a distinction from the other biblical texts by titling them in a way that refers to the scrolls on which they are recorded and preserved, just as all the rest are?

There are five such anomalies in the Hebrew biblical canon. Three texts are named "*Megillat* X" and two others are sorted into the canonical subcategory of the "Five *Megillot*" although they do not contain the phrase "*megillat*" in their titles: *Kohelet* (Ecclesiastes) and *Shir HaShirim*. Each of the five organized under that umbrella has its own unique tone and subject matter, none of which matches the structure and style of the remainder of the canon. *Kohelet* is

[38] *"Megillot"* is the plural of *"megillah"*
[39] *"Megillat"* is the possessive form of the word *"megillah,"* meaning "the scroll of" whatever word or name follows.

wisdom literature, a recitation of advice credited to King Shlomo,[40] inherently intended for embodiment. *Megillat Esther* and *Megillat Rut* both follow linear narratives tracing the triumphs of unexpected female heroines over seemingly insurmountable odds. *Shir HaShirim* contains a first-person lyrical romance, supported by a chorus of women, relating the love and desire of an unnamed young couple, widely interpreted as an allegory. *Megillat Eicha* is, as its English title states, a collection of lamentations mourning the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonian invaders, vividly describing the bloodshed and brutality of the conquering army. The readings of each of these texts are surrounded by immersive, visceral traditions of communal mourning and/or celebration.

Why distinguish these five texts specifically as "scrolls?" Firstly, they are unique in that they are read in their entirety on one specific day rather than parsed out into *parshas* and *haftorahs*.[41] A *megillah* is read in congregation from start to finish, the community experiencing its whole narrative and emotional arc in one fell swoop. Carrying forward this consideration of the *Megillot* as always engaged in their entirety, perhaps some etymology could aid in the appellation quandary. The term "role" derives from the French word "rôle," which in turn descends from the Old French "rolle."[42] With its first known use in 1605, "role" refers to the part one plays, be that a character on stage or in society. The term emerged from the way in which actors received their lines: not as the full text of each play, but rather, just the sections they needed, assembled on a roll of parchment. One might also call such a roll of parchment a scroll.

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[40] Solomon

[41] Portions of biblical books read in community each week and on holy-days. The five Mosaic books are largely read in order, one seven-part *parsha* at a time, with some interruptions for thematically relevant *parshas* for holy-days. Texts from the other two umbrella categories of the Hebrew Bible, *Neviim* (*Prophets*) and *Ktuvim* (Writings) are similarly divided into portions, though not assigned in chronological order but rather attached through a thematic connection to a *parsha* from the Mosaic books.

[42] "Role." Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster.

Perhaps, then, the Five *Megillot* merit that title not from the medium on which they are written, but in association with the way they can be read: as a performance, each actor given a role/roll.

It is not possible to prove that these texts were, definitively, originally framed as performance; therefore, I am offering a new way to approach them that infuses the *Megillot* with the power of performance by emphasizing the embodiment already embedded within elements of the texts and their contexts. In this vein, I am engaging the many pasts and presents of these combinations of texts and practices. The *Megillot* are operating in multiple historical contexts at once: the period during which each text is set, the era during which it was written, the historical moment at which each was first tied to its associated holy-day, when the rituals of those holy-days were established, the times to which the rituals harken back, modern applications of both text and ritual, and more compounding contexts that have emerged over the course of the Second Diaspora.[43] The when and where of these embodiments always have multiple answers, increasing exponentially through the centuries of the Second Diaspora as more temporal and geographical locations compound upon one another with the associations, traditions, tragedies, triumphs, and cultural influences that come with every new time and place. This complex temporality is a feature, not a flaw, positioning the *Megillot* as particularly situated to facilitate communal re-membering,[44] placing all of these layered moments into the present body to propel the collective into a shared future.

Both the past and the present grapple with complications connected to what it means to be a people in and after a diaspora. The criticality and complexity of the relationship between ritual/performance and diaspora runs through each of these cases; they represent a core function

[43] "Second Diaspora" refers to the exile and dispersion of the majority of the Jewish population following the Roman conquest of Israel in 70 CE. It is also the umbrella term for extended time period and existence of all Jews who have lived outside of their indigenous land after that point.
[44] I structure this word consciously to highlight the particular type of act I am investigating: one in which the participant reactivates a collective memory though their body.

of and for the reframed *Megillot*. The origins of all four *Megillot* in question at the close of the First Diaspora[45] informs what questions they are answering; the evolution of their corresponding holy-day practices around what is possible and necessary in the Second Diaspora speaks to how those answers can be applied in new but echoing contexts. The pressures and influences of surrounding cultures as well as differentiation among diasporic groups due to dispersal caused further fracturing of identity as the Second Diaspora dragged on and spread through a combination of repeated expulsions and travel innovations. This is now layered with the complexities of diaspora in the Information Age, compounded by the reestablishment of independence in our indigenous land creating both an opportunity for unity and site of division (Diasporic vs Remained/Repatriated). The function of the *Megillot* and their holy-days to navigate the shaky liminal space of simultaneous diasporic and post-diasporic existence is in need of revitalization to offer a way through this tangled web.

Though an actual oral/theatrical origin of the *Megillot* cannot be proven, all of these texts contain visible theatrical elements that subsequently lent themselves to embodied practices that have developed around the annual congregational readings of these texts. Thus, though a theatrical intent behind the *Megillot* cannot be definitively declared, they can be understood as performance texts in their present-day uses. The *Megillot* and their associated rituals can be analyzed through the lens of performance to reveal active engagement with the themes of community, nation, and gender. This analysis, in turn, scaffolds the performance potential of these texts beyond their conventional liturgical use, particularly as vehicles for addressing issues of community identity in relation to present-day crises. I aim to examine both the historical function of these texts and practices and a reexamination of how they might be deployed,

[45] "First Diaspora" refers to the exile and dispersion of the majority of the Jewish population following the Babylonian conquest of Israel in the 6th century BCE, and to their existence and experience between that point and the execution of the Edict of Cyrus in 589 BCE, which allowed exiled populations to return to their homelands.

including through my translations, which are intended to not only recuperate the inherent the inherent dramatic elements of the texts, but also provide scripts for future performances that infuse the texts with the affective power that emerges from embracing the embodied elements of the *Megillot* and their holy-days.

I will not be devoting a chapter to *Kohelet* in this project, due to the limitations in length and my desire to give each *megillah* its full analytical due. *Kohelet* comes with more complications in terms of dating than even *Rut*, and an analysis of the possibility of multiple voices in the text, its engagement with communal questions, the debate over its entry into and operation within the Hebrew biblical canon, and its function on its host holy-day (itself the subject of debate due to the splintering of *Sukkot*, *Shmini Atzeret*,[46] and *Simkhat Torah*[47] in the Diaspora) each come with enough complications to fill their own chapters. For the moment, I am saving *Kohelet* for a future addition to this work, one that will build upon the foundation I lay via my argument for the first four *Megillot*.

Cultural and Historical Context

Judaism has been carried down through the generations for over 3000 years by means of a combination of written, oral, and embodied traditions.[48] There are key elements of the ethno-religion that involve reenactment, an imagined and embodied reliving of Jewish history and tradition. The precedent of performed, embodied national memory is set through practices

[46] Literally "The Eighth Assembly," *Shmini Atzeret* is the holiday celebrated at the close of *Sukkot*. In Israel, it is celebrated jointly with *Simkhat Torah*, but in the Diaspora, it is its own distinct holiday.
[47] Literally "The Joy of the Torah," the holiday celebrating the conclusion and beginning of the annual cycle of communal chronological readings of the *Torah*, during which the last chapter and first chapter are read together and the community dances in circles with the *Torah* scrolls to celebrate the renewal of the cycle.
[48] For articles on early Jewish history, from origin mythos through the start of the Second Diaspora, see: Callaway, A. Joseph, Shaye J.D. Cohen, Siegfried H. Horn, Andre Lemaire, Lee I. Levine, P. Kyle McCarter Jr, Eic M. Meyers, Nahum M. Sarna, Herschel Shanks. *Ancient Israel: from Abraham to the Roman Destruction of the Temple*, edited by Hershel Shanks. The Biblical Archeology Society, 1999; Bloch-Smith, Elizabeth. "Israelite Ethnicity in Iron I: Archaeology Preserves What Is Remembered and What Is Forgotten in Israel's History." *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 122, no. 3, 2003, pp. 401–25; Atkinson, Kenneth. *Queen Salome: Jerusalem's Warrior Monarch of the First Century B.C.E*. McFarland & Company, Inc., 2012; and Ackerman, Susan. *Women and the Religion of Ancient Israel*. Yale University Press, 2022.

such as prayer and Torah reading, holy-day traditions and milestone events, as well as daily life.[49] The idea of embodiment plays into the very scaffolding of Rabbinic Judaism, which was a key factor in enabling Judaism to persist through all the challenges, dispersals, and persecutions that have come with the Second Diaspora.[50]

The Exodus story, in which the Israelites are miraculously liberated from slavery in Egypt and cross the split Reed Sea[51] to freedom, often is positioned as a (if not the) formative moment of the Israelite identity beyond an extended family into a proto-national collective. In that story, Moshe[52] raises his staff, the waters part, the Israelites hurry through, and the pursuing Egyptians drown in the reconstituted sea or are trapped on the opposite shore. As the waves settle, Moshe's older sister Miriam takes out a timbrel and leads the women in a celebratory song and dance, in which the rest of the Israelites join. This climactic, almost cinematic, moment begs a question: why did they already have timbrels?

This story carries within it an implication of performance woven into Israelite life from the very start, an instinct in the moment of transformation and liberation. Notably, the women were ready to accompany the performance – men are noted as singing, but the women turned it into a full, immersive performance. This song and dance on the shores of the Reed Sea might be seen as an overture to the ongoing embodiments deeply embedded in Judaism. Embodiment is

[49] For a thorough exploration of the evolution of Jewish holy-days and their practices, see: Steinberg, Paul. *Celebrating the Jewish Year: The Spring and Summer Holidays*, edited by Janet Greenstein Potter, The Jewish Publication Society, 2009 and Kosofsky, Scott-Martin. *The Book of Customs: A Complete Handbook for the Jewish Year*, HarperCollins Publishers, 2004.
[50] For more on various Second Diaspora Jewish communities, see: Biale, David. *Cultures of the Jews: A New History*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 15 October 2002.
[51] The "Red Sea" is a name that results from a mistranslation or typo somewhere in transmission from ancient to contemporary titles for the body of water on the border of Egypt in the crossing of which the Israelites of antiquity transformed from an enslaved race to a liberated nation. The name in the Bible is יַם סוּף, which literally translates to "The Sea of Reeds," and therefore I refer to it as such when discussing the Exodus story.
[52] Moses

entrenched in Judaism already and provides fertile ground for my reframing of the (relatively more modern but still ancient) *Megillot* and their corresponding, still-relevant ritual practices.

Even to begin properly parsing the story of Miriam's "Song of the Sea," one already must engage in an embodied Jewish tradition: *trop*, the melody of the Hebrew Bible. The scrolls containing Hebrew biblical texts historically do not and, by Jewish law, should not contain punctuation. Furthermore, Hebrew is an abjad, which means that most vowels are also more punctuation than letters and therefore left out of the scrolls as well. In order to read Torah texts, especially in congregation (where one reads directly from a scroll) or for the bulk of Jewish history during which it was not yet possible or popular to print biblical texts with punctuation, one needs to understand *trop*. This sort of score carries the key to unlock the mnemonic-esque text and is passed down through the generations. In this way, performance is crucial to access the core texts of Judaism.

Trop also makes possible a kind of channeling, which contains a tie to the ancient world in which the Torah texts originated. Unlike the way actors today are instructed to say the scripted words as if they are their own, chanting/singing Torah texts is about being a link in the chain, embodying and voicing for the past to bring it into the present and create the future.[53]

The performance elements of synagogue services carry through into prayer as well. Jewish prayer follows a script of liturgical texts provided to connect each congregant as well as the collective with the current moment and the histories, themes, and intentions carried within said script. Accompanying these scripts are stage directions: bend your knees on this word and bow on the next, take three steps backward and three steps forward during this phrase, strike your chest twice through this passage, stand here, sit there, cry out, whisper, cover your eyes

[53] See *Esther* chapter for a deeper dive into *trop* through the lens of performance.

with your right hand. This is just a selection of the choreography of Jewish prayer, the dance developed over the Second Diaspora to deepen connection through the body.

Beyond *trop* and the stage directions of prayer, Jewish practice is full of even more song and dance. Communal celebrations and milestone moments break out into circle dancing (which is even specifically scripted on the festival of *Simkhat Torah* in the form of the *Hakafot*, literally the "Circles" in which communities dance with the Torah). Bar/bat mitzvah celebrants and newlyweds are lifted in chairs and bounced to music by friends and family. The *Tehillim*[54] that were sung in the First and Second Temples have been re-scored over the centuries, but they continue to be sung in synagogues, at holiday meals, and around campfires. Moments of victory have a long history of catalyzing dancing in the streets in both biblical and more modern moments, from King David's legendary retrieval of the Ark of the Covenant from the Philistines[55] to contemporary communities greeting soldiers returning home safely. Song and dance are embodied signifiers of survival then and now and all the times in between. Music is a consistent medium for expressing pain and praise, pleas and celebrations.

Rabbinic Judaism itself is intrinsically linked with embodiment and speech acts, moving cultural identity between archive and repertoire, as defined by performance studies theorist Diana Taylor.[56] The era of Rabbinic Judaism began as the Second Temple Period was violently ended by the Roman conquest and subsequent start of the Second Diaspora in 70 CE. During the increasingly divided Second Temple Period, the Pharisees emerged as one of the dominant sects struggling for supremacy in defining collective Jewish identity. The Pharisees were the scholarly sect, arguing for the importance of Torah study and discourse, in contrast to the emphasis that the

[54] *Psalms*
[55] II Samuel 6:5
[56] Taylor, Diana. "Acts of Transfer." *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the America*. Duke University Press, 12 September 2003, 16-20.

priestly sect, the Sadducees, placed on Temple worship, and the more fringe Essenes placed on asceticism. The early rabbis can be seen as the Pharisees' successors, continuing to champion the centrality of scholarship, discourse, and communal practice, the need for which was made urgent when there was no longer an option to operate around the Temple.[57]

Rabbinic Judaism is based on the interplay between the Written Torah and the Oral Torah. The Written Torah consists of the canonized texts. The Oral Torah comes from engaging with what is written. The Second Temple Period marks the end of an era of very oral, and therefore embodied, Judaism in the relative safety and unity of our indigenous land. The modern conception of Jews as "the People of the Book" is not an accurate reflection of how Jews would have figured themselves at the time these books (the Talmudic texts and forward) were written. That essence of orality and embodiment is still there, albeit muddled by the necessities of the long Second Diaspora.

The Talmud is the codification of the Oral Torah, which was written down following the Roman conquest of Israel out of fear that it would be lost when the majority of the Jewish population went into forced exile. It consists of 38 books, broken into *masekhets*[58] and *sugyot*.[59] It is a record of the debates of Jewish scholars as they puzzled through law and biblical interpretations, interspersed with relevant stories called "*aggadetah*." It is primarily comprised of the *Mishnah*, shorter transcriptions of the debates of the *Tanna* generation of scholars who came from the first generation completely born under Roman rule, and the *Gemara*, the debates of the *Amora* generation (those who followed the Tannas) about the contents of the *Mishnah* and their additions to the ongoing conversation. It also includes the later commentary on the *Mishnah* and

[57] For more on the Second Temple Period, see: Josephus. *The New Complete Works of Josephus*. Translated by William Whitman, Kregel Publications, 21 May 1999 and Grabbe, Lester L. *The History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period, Volume 1: Yehud, the Persian Province of Judah*. Continuum, 12 August 2010.
[58] Portions organized by theme
[59] Smaller sections grouped by the Mishnah on which they are commenting

Gemara of Middle Ages scholars like Rashi and Ibn Ezra. Though the Oral Torah is now partially written down, the belief system behind it continues as a crucial component of Jewish learning and practice as the centuries-long conversation continues: the understanding that the written text has an important partner which is carried through the minds and bodies of the people. This is key to what I will be using in my exploration throughout this project – both the parts of the Oral Torah that have been written down and those which still live in our bodies. Applying Taylor's analysis of cultural knowledge in the Americas to Jewish diasporic development reveals how Rabbinic Judaism blends the archive and the repertoire, attempting to preserve ephemeral oral/embodied knowledge by transposing it into written form and activating written texts by incorporating them into embodied practices. Doing so inevitably altered both: as Taylor asserted, the liveness of the repertoire connotes that it will change over time, so recording embodied knowledge through the written word locks it in one particular iteration – and bias. Taylor notes that all archival knowledge, anything inscribed, might transcend time but carries biases with it. Transforming archive into repertoire might help shake it free of the biases of one moment in time, but also makes it subject to the shifting meanings made possible by performance.[60] It is from this tradition that the practices surrounding the *Megillot* and their holy-days developed, and thus they already carry the complexities of attempts to interweave what scriptocentric societies have positioned as a binary (the written and the embodied) – a binary that has been challenged by performance studies scholars, including Taylor herself. This weaving of Rabbinic Judaism paves the way for the *Megillot* and their holy-days to work with both the power of performance to transform for the time while transmitting cultural knowledge and to bring together multiple moments in time.

[60] Taylor, Diana. "Acts of Transfer." *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the America*. Duke University Press, 12 September 2003, 21-26.

Embodiment is embedded within the narratives contained in the Written Torah as well. The throughline I am tracing across these four *Megillot* of a feminized body performing for the sake of the whole people connects to a long and layered history of what I would categorize as performances of femininity in Jewish texts and traditions. This includes multiple Matriarchs who played into contemporaneous conceptions of feminine charm in order to guarantee safe passage for themselves and their husbands,[61] tales of women who faked a period in order to protect themselves and others,[62] and at least two women who seduced enemy generals in order to drug and kill them to prevent or end a war.[63] Add to this the many conceptions of all that is contained in motherhood, reproductive labor, and the very word for "mercy" and "compassion" in biblical Hebrew: "*rakhamim*," derived from the same root as "*rekhem*," "uterus."[64] The Torah and liturgy are ripe with feminized spiritual iconography, from the *Shekhina*, the feminine-conjugated name for God's presence, to the *Shabbat* Queen/Bride, the mythical spirit who represents the special quality of the weekly Day of Rest. Esther, Lady Zion, the Raaya, and Rut[65] all spring from a long line of feminized figures who feature heavily in historical/legendary stories of Jewish survival and ongoing ideologies and rituals tied to Jewish identity.

In addition to culturally situating them, it is important to set the *Megillot* in their layered historical contexts. Every *megillah* comes with both a mythological setting and a historical moment at which it was first recorded. I will expand further on each *megillah*'s context(s) and its relevance in the following chapters, but all of those settings lie within moments of crisis for the Jewish/Israelite people. The earliest records of each of the *Megillot* can all be traced to the

[61] Both Sarah and Rivka (Rebecca) get their husbands out of a jam with a foreign king in this fashion.
[62] The first example of this type of performance, chronologically, is in the story of Rachel, another Matriarch. She does this when her duplicitous father chases after her family when they are attempting to leave when is essentially indentured servitude to him.
[63] Yael does this in *Shoftim* (*Judges*) and Yehudit (Judith) in the non-canonized but still studied Apocrypha.
[64] I must give credit to Rabbi Yitz Greenberg for introducing me to this deeply meaningful linguistic connection.
[65] The leading ladies in our *Megillot*

Second Temple Period, and they are explicitly attached to the holy-day practices that can be recognized today during the early stages of the Second Diaspora. Both the return from the First Diaspora and the start of the Second made the question of collective Jewish/Israelite identity urgently relevant, especially considering the centrality of our indigenous land (Israel) to practice and identity. What did it mean to reunite in the land following the First Diaspora? How could Jewish identity carry forward despite the violent dispersal of the Second?

The function of the *Megillot* as post-diasporic texts whose roles evolved again at the start of the Second Diaspora can apply at this stage, 2000 years later. These are texts that emerged as tools for a fractured community to connect, paired with embodied practices to create immersion, collapse time, and deepen affective impact. Their combined power to connect the collective through embodiment can be better understood and engaged when approached through the lens of performance.

The layered temporalities of these texts and traditions all grapple with complications connected to what it means to be a people in and after a diaspora. Like other diasporic peoples, Jews have navigated the pressures and influences of surrounding cultures. As is the case in other contexts, these outside forces and the very fact of their multitudinousness plays into the difficulties of survivance of Jewish culture and identity.. Some of the fractures caused by the long Second Diaspora might be healed by the increased communication possible in the Information Age and onward as well as the increasing accessibility of long-distance travel, but these same innovations reveal yet more complexities that need to be navigated to find, form, reify, and harness a conception of Jewish identity. Compounded with the complexities of reestablished sovereignty in our indigenous land, this all plays into the analysis of the function of the *Megillot* and their host holy-days as both diasporic and post-diasporic. Reframing them as

performance draws out the ways in which each operates to meet the needs of both kinds of community through collective re-membering.

It is also productive to place the *Megillot* in the broader context of other contemporaneous cultures along the Mediterranean coast as well. Due to evidence for cultural exchange across the sea and the perceptions said societies had of one another as more similar than their more inland contemporaries, the comparison of the texts and embodied contexts of the *Megillot* to ancient Greek, Egyptian, and Anatolian performances offers further orientation for understanding these pairings through the lens of performance, particularly one that de-centers Western preconceptions that constrain definitions of theatre and divorce them from ritual.

Key Terms

I have found it most productive to employ the categorization of Judaism as an ethno-religion, particularly in the context of the layered histories in which it is crucial to contextualize these texts and holy-days. It is relevant to consider the ways in which an ethno-religion differs from most modern conceptions of religion: Judaism is mostly closed; is predominantly something into which one is born; was defined for a time and until fairly recently as a race; and denotes shared culture, history, and genetics as well as religious practices. Additionally, from a Jewish legal and ethnic perspective, all who are born Jewish are considered Jews their whole lives no matter what they do, even if a Jew joins another religion. Judaism contains elements of the modern conceptions of ethnicity, faith, race, and nationality, and that interplay is a key consideration when investigating questions of Jewish collective identity.[66]

Throughout the following chapters, I will be using both the term "Israelite" and "Jew." Both names refer to the same collective ethno-religious body, with the latter giving way to the

[66] For more details on the relevance of Judaism as an ethno-religion in this context, see the following: Lipshitz, Yair. *Theatre & Judaism*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 22 March 2019, 8-10.

former during the late First Diaspora and early Second Temple Period. The term "Israelite" comes from the alternate name of the Patriarch Yaakov,[67] literally meaning "one who grappled with God," and is used to refer to the nation[68] of twelve tribes descended from him. Following the invasion of the Assyrians and subsequently the Babylonians in the 6th century BCE, much of ten of the Twelve Tribes of Israel were lost to colonial violence or in exile. Those who remained gained the new title of "Jew" after "Judah," the tribe from which the ruling dynasty descended and the area in which Jerusalem, the capital and center of worship, was located.

Beyond the scope of Jewish linguistic complexity, two more terms are relevant to understanding the work I am doing across this project: "the carnivalesque" and "heterotopia." The former was coined by Mikhail Bakhtin. In his book *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin proposes the concept of the carnivalesque, a contained period during which some social norms and signifiers of socio-economic divisions are temporarily lifted. These carnivalesque occasions typically include practices that are rowdy, unruly, spectacular, even raunchy. Misbehaviors, mischief, and transgressions are flipped from the forbidden to the norm – for a moment. This promotes a release from the constraints of civil and religious propriety. Human nature is explored through the mingling of the sacred and the profane, in some cases even providing an opportunity to rehearse more permanent change, though primarily functioning to reify the order that is temporarily being violated. Each of the holy-days I am investigating in this project engages in some way with elements of the carnivalesque, making them an occasion not only for release, but for reification of collective identity and even opportunities to test out other possible ways of being that could be integrated into said identity. By exploring their theatrical potential, I hope to

[67] Jacob

[68] I use the word "nation" here and throughout in the sense of ethnic nation, a people, in an attempt to translate the Hebrew word "עם," referring to a people united by ethnicity, belief, practices, origins, government, and more, not the modern, haunted meaning of the word "nation" and conception of nation-states.

also combat the constraints of the carnivalesque, the dangers that come with limiting their releases and lessons to only one moment per year.

As holy-days, each of these moments (with its *Megillah*) operates as a sort of heterotopia. This concept was introduced by Michel Foucault in the article "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias."[69] While a utopia is an impossible place exemplifying some type of perfection, a heterotopia is a liminal space in which one cannot live full time, but when one enters, one encounters a distinct set of rules for behaving and social organization. Like the carnivalesque, heterotopias both challenge and reinforce the operating powers of the outside world, offering a release or escape but requiring a return. A heterotopia contains multiple spaces and times, which is particularly relevant to the compounding contexts of the *Megillot* and their associated holy-days. Two of Foucault's conceptions of heterotopia, the ephemeral festival and the archive of indefinitely accumulating time, come together in my exploration of the potential embodied pairing of text and tradition: these texts and their holy-days are vessels for compounding memory, continuously accumulating more "pasts" that stack upon one another in the temporary spaces of restructured rules of being.

Eich – How and Why

Nadine Holdsworth, in her book *Theatre & Nation*, proposes that "[t]heatre offers…a space to find another form of articulacy that can speak to and of these moments of crisis."[70] My intervention in this project invests the combination of the *Megillot* and the practices of their corresponding holy-days with the ability of theatre to articulate, grapple with, and, indeed, survive crises. This work infuses them with healing potential and collectivizing power.

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[69] Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Cities." translated by Jay Miskowiec. *Diacritics*, Spring, 1986, Vol. 16, No. 1, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986, 22-27.
[70] Holdsworth, Nadine. *Theatre & Nation*. Palgrave Macmillan Ltd., 2010, 43.

Incorporating ritual practices as part of the performance experience offers the possibility of full immersion and to play with the embodiment and "re-enacting" of those moments on the Jewish calendar, both the communal experiences and embodied histories. Looking specifically at these four texts with their extra layers of performance with the varied metaperformances of femininity and how they play into historical moments is especially useful in the current moment of historic rising antisemitism, the increasing sectarianism of the past century, and the ability to reconnect from across the Diaspora both in our indigenous land and through modern travel/communication innovations (which introduces as many complications as it does opportunities). The goal is to tap into the power of performance within these texts and embodied practice pairings to operate as settings/tools for community formation/strengthening.

Additionally, I intend for this project to push against a common idea of womanhood in the Bible. This perspective is encapsulated by Levy's configuration of biblical women as "abused as a free-for-all image, a bereft-of-individuality literary object."[71] I contend that womanhood, the performance of femininity, is also a source of power in the Hebrew Bible, and the feminized figures featured in these *Megillot* exemplify the power of putting on womanhood to change, comfort, cajole, create, and more.

To achieve these ends, I have attempted to bring together the academy and the *yeshiva*[72] by way of the theatre and the synagogue. In addition to engaging with and building off of the work of other scholars of performance studies, Judaic studies, and exegesis, I am applying the tools native to these texts and practices and marrying them with a theatrical lens. To this end, I have brought together a combination of literary analysis, applying performance theory, examining history, engaging with work that has been done on these texts as well as other poetry

[71] Levy, Shimon. "Introduction" *The Bible as Theatre*. Sussex Academic Press, 2000, 8.
[72] An academy of Jewish learning

and performance texts, and placing everything in both historical and cultural contexts in order to evaluate what emerges from the combinations.

In doing so, I am entering into conversation with other scholars of biblical theatricality. Terry Giles and William J. Doan argue for the historicity of an oral origin for *Rut* in their book of biblical performance criticism, *The Naomi Story – The Book of Ruth: From Gender to Politics*. In this work, Giles and Doan analyze the text of the *megillah* through the lens of performance, using the works of previous scholars Werner Kelber and Frank Polak to identify hallmarks of texts with oral histories in order to claim that *Rut* belongs in that category. Giles and Doan present *Rut* as having begun as an interactive communal performance, specifically for and by women. They suggest that the audience was cast as the chorus of women in *Beit Lekhem*, prepared to interject their lines at the right moments in the story and to audibly react to the events unfolding. Their analysis of the text is robust and extremely helpful for my own examination of the performance potential of the *Megillot*, but their claims are based almost exclusively on this sort of literary analysis, with no other evidence to support their historical claims; therefore, the work offers more speculation than solid proof of *Rut* as a performed event for a gathering of women.

Shimon Levy, on the other hand, does focus on potential over history: he investigates and tests the possibility of theatrically reinterpreting selections (though not necessarily full books/scrolls) from Hebrew biblical texts. In doing so, he mines the texts for their inherently theatrical elements, such as stage directions, setting and lighting, and the meta-performance of characters within the narrative. Like Giles and Doan, he engages in close reading of the texts, examining them for elements that lend themselves to performance, such as dialogic language, specifications for multiple locations, and speech acts. He is ultimately interested in staging such

selections in Israel, to reintegrate the texts into the land, which he has done with small groups of theatre artists. Levy's analysis is, however, largely disconnected from the times during which these biblical texts are read in congregation: his goal is to use them to create stand-alone pieces of theatre that reawaken Jewish history in the body, but are detached from their religious/cultural contexts.

Nehama Ashkenasy combines Levy's analysis of potential with Giles and Doan's focus on *Rut*: she is concerned primarily with reframing *Rut* as a comedy grounded in Bakhtinian suspension/upending of societal rules. She, too, engages in close reading of the text, in this case in direct comparison to Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque, though her focus is entirely on the *megillah* without the context of *Shavuot* and its own carnivalesque elements. Ashkenasy examines the contrasting speaking styles of the characters, the comedy of the odd naming conventions, and the deployment of theatrical archetypes in *Rut*, all in service of the sort of subversive situational comedy she sees in the *megillah*.

Unlike Levy, Ashkenasy, Giles, and Doan, Robert Alter's approach to the *Megillot* is distinctly antitheatrical; in fact, he argues against those who support a dramatic interpretation of the texts. His focus is literary: Alter analyzes the *Megillot* as poetry and narratives, which informs his own translations of these texts. He breaks down the poetic devices at play in the *Megillot*, particularly *Shir HaShirim*, and interprets the dialogic nature of the texts of *Rut* and *Esther* as compelling storytelling devices, not sources for theatrical staging. He grounds his analysis in history, drawing on both the likely origins of each text and contemporaneous literary traditions. He draws on past scholars' discussions of the texts, particularly arguing against allegorical or religious readings of them and reframing the texts as historical literary objects. Alter suggests that some of the *Megillot*, such as *Shir HaShirim*, are actually anthologies of

poems from multiple authors that were subsequently organized into a unified book and entered into the biblical canon. His goal is to examine these biblical texts more in the vein one might analyze surviving literature of extinct ancient societies and to use his analysis to re-translate them as ancient literature.

Translations

Along with my analysis, I have re-translated the texts of each *megillah* from the original Hebrew in the structure of a script to highlight their potential as performance texts. In this endeavor, I have drawn guidance and inspiration from the translation work of Emily Wilson and Robert Alter, as well as centuries of Jewish exegetes whose commentary on the *Megillot* offers insights into possible layers of meaning and the cultural hauntedness of words and phrases. Wilson's approach to the Homeric epics inspired my determination to capture the lyricism and affective accessibility of the *Megillot* – balancing meter and structure (including adapting the alphabetic acrostic of *Eicha* across writing systems), keeping the rhythm, and translating affective impact for contemporary audience without censoring the sometimes scandalous content. Wilson's work paved the way for my determination to show how beautiful language does not have to be inaccessible; she laid fertile groundwork for translating ancient texts into fittingly lyrical forms without building stumbling blocks for the audience/readers. Alter's own work on and in biblical translation provided insights into how I could capture the poetry of the language without sacrificing literal meanings to metaphor. The *Megillot* are for the people, in terms of access and affect, and I aim for my work to make that true again.

The translation process itself afforded me a slew of discoveries, such as the "family-friendly" layered humor of *Rut*, the interruptions of *Eicha*, Esther's linguistic arc, and the ways in which the chorus in *Shir HaShirim* gently urges on the Raaya. Impacts of this work

also began to become clearer in table discussions and talkback wherein audiences and actors alike spoke to the extreme relevance today of the *Megillot* with record rising of antisemitism. Audiences at the workshop of my translations discussed how experiencing the *Megillot* as immersive theatrical events made them feel more alive and connected to the present, relevant in content and useful in power. Embodiment by actors brought vibrant new life to stories some actors and audience had experienced their whole lives, transforming these from old narratives to recognizable, visceral theatre.

My translations serve a twofold purpose. The first is internal, within the global Jewish community: these translations help connect the texts to their layered contexts and offer an approach that can tie them to their renewed relevance. These texts operate as vehicles, catalysts, and road maps for unification and hope. Renewed relevance demands a renewed medium. My translations provide access as well as a new avenue into approaching the stories, themes, and affective power of the *Megillot*. The second purpose is external, regarding perceptions of Jews, Jewish history, Jewish culture, and Jewish identity. The same new avenue into the *Megillot* allows the broader world a window through which to see the complexities of all of the above, challenging antisemitic narratives and stereotypes and offering an alternative understanding of what it has meant, does mean, and can mean to be Jewish.

Operating Order

There are multiple ways to order the *Megillot*. Placing them in chronological order based on the settings of their stories would be *Rut*, *Shir HaShirim*,[73] *Eicha*, then *Esther*. Following the order of their holy-days starting at the biblical new year in the month of Nissan makes it *Shir HaShirim*, *Rut*, *Eicha*, then *Esther*, but starting at the modern new year in the month of *Tishrei* flips it so *Esther* is first, followed by *Eicha*, *Shir HaShirim*, then *Rut*. For the purpose of this

[73] Or *Shir HaShirim* then *Rut*, due to both being set somewhat ambiguously during the era of the *Shoftim* (Judges).

project, I have placed them in the latter order not only because that is the most familiar cycle to contemporary Jewish audiences, but also because it lends itself best to the build of my argument toward the conclusion of the potential impact of the combined conception I call *The Megillah Cycle*. Beginning with the deeply theatrical text and festival context of *Esther*, shifting to the incredibly embodied collective mourning of *Eicha*, moving through the temporality-collapsing *Shir HaShirim* and its possible pair of festivals, and ending on *Rut*'s layered comedic performativity in service of futurity. *Esther* and *Purim* are the easiest examples to prove the central point on performative potential, which then provides a foundation for the proceeding chapters. *Eicha* and *Tisha B'Av* then drive home the importance of emphasizing not only embodiment, but collective embodiment in order to draw out the full power of these pairings. *Shir HaShirim* and *Pesach* (and the possible palimpsest carrying *Tu B'Av*, to be discussed in that chapter) build upon *Eicha* and *Tisha B'Av*'s ability to compound the griefs of different times by collapsing multiple times into one another through the body. This makes way for *Rut* and *Shavuot* to bring those bodies back into their manifold past contexts in order to collectively configure a way forward.

Esther:

Hiding, Hope, and *Nahafokh-Hu*

Megillat Esther is one of the last texts in the Hebrew biblical canon, both chronologically and in terms of the order of canonization. It details the story of Esther saving the Jewish people from genocide. I examine the structure, musical score, and traditions surrounding *Esther* in the context of contemporaneous ancient performance practices and subsequent theatrical traditions. To this, I add the application of other analytical frameworks used to excavate performativity within individual and communal behaviors. Viewed through this analytical framework, the carnivalesque atmosphere surrounding *Purim*, the text of *Esther*, and the titular character's layered performance belie a strong capacity to bring out the power of *Esther* through theatrical embodiment.

Esther is a Jewish orphan born in the Diaspora following the Babylonian conquest of Israel, after which the empire had exiled the majority of the Israelite[74] population. Esther did not grow up under Babylonian rule, however, since by then the Babylonian Empire had fallen to the Persian Empire by the time her story begins. The text follows Esther's elevation to queen of Persia after the king, Akhashverosh, set aside his old queen Vashti for her refusal to show off her beauty for the men at his feast. Esther is brought to the palace complex and given her choice of beauty treatments and ornamentation – she consults the royal chamberlain Hegai on the king's preferences and chooses only what aligns with those. Her cleverness is rewarded, and she is chosen to be queen. Meanwhile, her (undisclosed) uncle Mordechai waits at the palace gates every day to check on his niece from afar, and from this vantage point is able to foil a plot against the king's life.

[74] I use "Israelite" and "Jew" somewhat interchangeably in this chapter. *Esther* is actually one of the earliest examples of the use of "Jew" to refer to the nation of Israel.

After feeling offended by Mordechai refusing to bow down to him, Akhashverosh's new chief vizier, Haman, sets out to destroy the Jews by issuing a decree in the king's name to prompt the citizens of the empire to murder their Jewish neighbors on the 13th of the month of Adar. Esther takes responsibility for the survival of her people, orders a fast, and carefully prepares to meet the king uninvited. Through a series of performances, ploys, and miraculous coincidences (and two private feasts), Esther turns the tables on Haman, reveals her Jewish heritage to her royal husband, and (together with her now-disclosed uncle Mordechai) grants the Jews of the Persian Empire permission to defend themselves against those who sought to fulfill Haman's genocidal decree. The *megillah* ends with Esther and Mordechai establishing the practices of the holiday that will celebrate the survival of the Jewish people.

The text is the basis of the holiday of *Purim*, on which *Esther* is read aloud twice in the span of 25 hours as a part of a day of festivities. Despite having a holiday celebrating her story, the figure of Esther has been sidelined through people attributing her success to her beauty and feminine modesty, and Mordechai given top billing in her place in discussions and adaptations of the *Esther* story from Talmudic debates to graphic novels; however, while she does use performances of feminine beauty to her benefit, at the core of the story is a clever woman carrying her whole nation in her body. With elements of multi-leveled performance, music, audience interaction, inversions, and shifting presentations based on situations and expectations, *Esther* is a story about performance told through performance, all with a woman at the helm using embodiment to save and guide her people. The blatantly theatrical structure and context of *Esther* pave a clear path forward to draw on that inherent theatricality to reframe *Esther* as a performance text and a model through which to analyze the other *Megillot* in that same light. This *megillah* is reminiscent of a script, a text meant to be not just read aloud, but embodied,

surrounded by festive customs (such as community-wide feasting and masquerading that lifts religious dictates of dress) that veer into the carnivalesque. It also aligns with a pattern of female leaders, both mythological and historical,[75] acting as national agents, embodying and representing their nations in public performance to resolve crises and guide their people through transitional periods.

In this chapter, I begin by exploring the history behind *Esther* and its relevance to the function of the text both then and now. I then break down the elements of the text that lend themselves to and suggest theatricality, comparing *Esther* to lists of parameters laid out for oral texts and to contemporaneous performance texts as well as examining the musical scoring of the *megillah*. Following this, I analyze Esther herself's performances within the narrative of the *megillah* and the collective carnival that is *Purim*, then explain the insufficiencies of previous theatrical reinterpretations of *Esther* when it comes to fully capturing and conveying the themes and affective power made possible by the pairing of *Esther* and *Purim*.

Context Clues

I posit that the history of *Esther* sheds light into its performance potentiality. The moment from which *Esther* emerged was a fraught one. The Jewish people had only recently been reunited following the 100-year exile that ended when the Persian King Cyrus the Great[76] allowed the Jews of the Diaspora to reunite with the small communities that had been allowed to remain in their homeland of Israel in 538 BCE. National identity was thus in flux as the two communities became one again. The Temple in Jerusalem had been at the center of Israelite worship, which, at that point in history, was at the core of national formation. Judaism is an

[75] At this point in human history, in the ancient world, the differentiation between myth and history is more muddied. Histories are hidden in myths, myths are treated as history, but all of it belies the cultural values of the nation from whence it came at the time at which it was created and recorded.
[76] Who, according to Jewish legend, was the son of Esther and Akhashverosh

ethno-religion, a nation that shares an indigenous land, common descent, and a religious practice that is woven into the culture and identity of the group. That was not exceptional in the ancient Mediterranean world; rather, it was the standard. The centralized worship in the Temple and the land-based practices included in Jewish daily observance, however, meant that destruction and exile left the nation with a quandary: adapt practices to their new circumstances or assimilate into nonexistence. Both the community in the Diaspora and those who were allowed to remain in Israel chose the former, setting the stage for the rise of the Pharisees and the following Early Rabbinic Period of Judaism.

The different groups of Jews across the First Diaspora and in colonized Israel could not easily communicate with one another under imperial rule, so the adapted practices and attached identities that evolved had their differences as well. When they were allowed to reunite and reestablish autonomous rule in Israel under the Hasmonean Dynasty, the two camps had to find a way to meld with each other and connect with original practices that could be revived with the construction of the Second Temple. After a century of separation and adaptation, the nation had to redefine itself once again, all with the backdrop of shifting imperial powers threatening the tenuous new reality.[77]

Addressing the function of theatre for nations under duress, Nadine Holdsworth asserts that "in the aftermath of these uncertain times modes of looking and being can be recast as the nation seeks to reassert itself in the contemporary moment."[78] Though discussing a different sort of uncertainty, Holdsworth's views on the role of performance in national reconstituting can apply to the immediate aftermath of other crises, particularly with both internal fracturing and external threats shaking a populace's understanding of itself. Later in the same book, Holdsworth

[77] A little irony here in terms of dating the text: Jewish belief has the story originally being recorded during the Persian exile, but the earliest surviving version of the text has been dated a little later, during the Hellenistic Period.
[78] Holdsworth, Nadine. *Theatre & Nation*. Palgrave Macmillan (2010), 43.

discusses the power of national iconography and identity, specifically how "[c]ultural practices can bring forth the instabilities of national iconographies to question their potency, significance and signification…The exploration of absence as well as presence unmasks the sociopolitical divisions and power relations of gender, colonialism, class, race and sexuality inherent in national iconography."[79]

Combining these two ideas, with the spirit of inversion that comes with both theatre and *Esther*, I see the relevance of a text like *Esther* during the Hasmonean Period in Israelite history. Uncertainty and division can drive a culture into its grave, and the repurposing of national iconography in the form of new mythos like *Esther* has the potential to shore up unity between classes and sects. The *megillah* is, after all, a late addition to the canon and a type of story that does not fully fit with the texts that came before it. As Stephen Nimis asserts regarding Euripides, the near-contemporary and Mediterranean neighbor of the writer(s) of *Esther*, "The purpose of myth…is to mediate real social contradictions by providing them with imaginative resolutions."[80] *Esther* provides a new origin story, one that does not cancel out or contradict any previous beliefs nor does it erase the long, unified history of the Jews in Israel. Rather, it reaffirms their unity and cultural connection through a new, more contemporaneous story of rebirth and collective survival against all odds that mirrors in some ways the Exodus story: the Jews are displaced, oppressed in a land that is not their own, face a prominent figure who seeks to destroy them, and are ultimately not only able to survive, but turn the tables on their oppressors and pave the way for their return to their homeland. At the time *Esther* was canonized, the Jews had been allowed to return to Israel and reestablish sovereignty, but their

[79] Holdsworth, Nadine. *Theatre & Nation*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, 61.
[80] Nimis, Stephen. "Theban Autochthony and Athenian Ideology in the *Phoenissae* of Euripides." *Mediterranean Studies*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2017, 149.

freedom and cultural unity were once again under threat from invading powers, making a reaffirmation of national identity more necessary than ever.

One such power was the Hellenes, whose nation tends to get credit for innovating the practices that are at the core of Western drama. With a comparative wealth of confirmed performance texts preserved from the Greek archive, Hellenistic plays provide a sample pool through which common dramatic conventions can be uncovered. At the time when the earliest surviving version of *Megillat Esther* was written down, hallmarks of performance in the Mediterranean world included music, the use of a chorus, direct address or general lack of a fourth wall, and the dramatization of national myths and histories. This was the age of the festivals of Dionysus in Greece and Cybele in Anatolia, with worship including gatherings for what we might recognize as theatre. The City Dionysia, or festival of Dionysus, stems from the worship of the god of wine, revelry, and possession, the demigod-turned-Olympian Dionysus from whose festivals emerged Athenian drama and the dithyramb. Dionysus was god of reversals, inversion, upturning of the traditional order in order to reveal truths.[81] The tragedies staged in the festivals of Dionysus contained lessons, warnings, and catharsis, while the comedies carefully satirized the political and social subjects *du jour*. Similarly, the worship of Cybele, Dionysus' Anatolian and Phrygian female forebear, involved public pageantry and revelry that upturned societal norms,[82] with Cybele regarded as the bridge between civilization and the unrestricted wild.[83] Ancient Mediterranean theatre has, at its core, a festival of inversions and reversals to reveal truths – I view *Esther* as emblematic of that type of storytelling and propose that the rituals of *Purim* thus resemble and hold the seeds of a theatre festival.

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[81] Evans, Nancy. "Dionysus: Civic Rituals of Wine, Theater, and Transformation." *Civic Rites: Democracy and Religion in Ancient Athens*, 1st ed., University of California Press (2010), 170–207.
[82] Roller, Lynn Emrich. *In Search of God the Mother: The Cult of Anatolian Cybele*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1999, 228-232.
[83] Ibid. 110-114.

Giles and Doan: Setting the Stage

To zoom in on the performative potential of *Esther*, we must first zoom out and consider the other *Megillot* and the discourse surrounding them. Of the Five *Megillot*, *Rut* is most similar to *Esther*. It relays the clearly narrativistic, dialogic story of two women, Rut and Naomi, their relationship, their trials, and their ultimate triumphs. Like *Esther*, it is a linear narrative centering around a female figure who is ultimately associated with national salvation: *Rut* ends with a list of Rut's descendants, leading to King David, founder of the Davidic royal dynasty that continued to rule from Jerusalem until the Babylonian invasion. The rolodex of Davidic rulers includes leaders who defended the nation from threats both foreign and domestic, built the Temple that served as the center of worship and culture, and are believed to someday include the messiah who will herald in an era of eternal peace. The structure of *Rut* is unusual in a number of the same ways *Esther* is, with the peculiarities eliciting an analysis from Terry Giles and William J. Doan in their book of biblical performance criticism, *The Naomi Story – The Book of Ruth: From Gender to Politics*. While I disagree that one can definitively establish either *Esther* or *Rut* as originating as theatrical events based on the evidence Giles and Doan present, their argument lays a strong foundation for uncovering the potentiality of both texts to serve as scripts of sorts; therefore, I will transpose the points engaged by Giles and Doan from *Rut* onto *Esther* to showcase the latter's qualifications for theatrical reframing.

Giles and Doan employ the analytical parameters of Werner Kelber and Frank H. Polak, both of whom lay out hallmarks of texts with oral pasts in order to argue that *Rut* is a text intended for embodied role-play rather than reading. Kelber lists scenic duality, focus on individuals, and dialogue with give and take as central features of texts that have embodied

legacies.[8485] The narrative in *Esther* is certainly character-driven, and it maintains a consistent dual focus on Esther herself and her uncle Mordechai, while also devoting significant narrative attention to its villain, Haman, and the supporting character of King Akhashverosh as individuals. Give and take is present across the dialogue-heavy text, which also feeds into the individual character focus. Chapter four is almost entirely devoted to a back and forth between Mordechai and Esther, and one of the climactic moments of the story is contained within that dialogue.[86] Much of Haman's plotting is presented through dialogue with his wife and "those close to him,"[87] with him complaining, them presenting him with advice, and him coming up with a scheme (or, later, despairing) based on their feedback. The final climactic moments as well as the extended resolution are in dialogue form, too, with Esther and Akhashverosh discussing her requests and, subsequently, the fate of her people.

This last section lends itself to the second set of parameters laid out by Giles and Doan, those established by Polak: language is less formal, contains more pronomials and deictics, the presence of paratactic constructions, sentences with fewer constituents, and rarity of longer noun phrases.[8889] While the lyrical nature of *Esther* persists throughout, the dialogue (and even some sections of narration) contains the remainder of Polak's signifiers. I return to that climactic banquet scene as an example:

וַיֹּאמֶר֩ הַמֶּ֨לֶךְ לְאֶסְתֵּ֜ר גַּם בַּיּ֣וֹם הַשֵּׁנִ֗י בְּמִשְׁתֵּ֤ה הַיַּיִן֙ מַה־שְּׁאֵלָתֵ֣ךְ אֶסְתֵּ֣ר הַמַּלְכָּ֔ה וְתִנָּתֶ֖ן לָ֑ךְ וּמַה־בַּקָּשָׁתֵךְ֙ עַד־חֲצִ֣י הַמַּלְכ֔וּת וְתֵעָֽשׂ׃

[84] Giles, Terry and William J. Doan, *The Story of Naomi – The Book of Ruth: From Gender to Politics*. Cascade Books, 26 January 2016, 66-67.
[85] Kelber, Werner H. *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q*. Fortress Press, 1983, 51–54.
[86] Esther 4:3-14.
[87] Esther 5:10, 5:14, 6:13.
[88] Giles, Terry and William J. Doan, *The Story of Naomi – The Book of Ruth: From Gender to Politics*. Cascade Books, 26 January 2016, 69.
[89] Polak, Frank H. "The Style of the Dialogue in Biblical Prose Narrative." *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society*, vol. 28, issue 1, 2001, 57, https://janes.jtsa.edu/volumes/28/1/article-6/.

וַתַּעַן אֶסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה וַתֹּאמַר אִם־מָצָאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ הַמֶּלֶךְ וְאִם־עַל־הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב תִּנָּתֶן־לִי נַפְשִׁי בִּשְׁאֵלָתִי וְעַמִּי בְּבַקָּשָׁתִי׃

כִּי נִמְכַּרְנוּ אֲנִי וְעַמִּי לְהַשְׁמִיד לַהֲרוֹג וּלְאַבֵּד וְאִלּוּ לַעֲבָדִים וְלִשְׁפָחוֹת נִמְכַּרְנוּ הֶחֱרַשְׁתִּי כִּי אֵין הַצָּר שׁוֶה בְּנֶזֶק הַמֶּלֶךְ׃

וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ וַיֹּאמֶר לְאֶסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה מִי הִוא זֶה וְאֵי־זֶה הוּא אֲשֶׁר־מְלָאוֹ לִבּוֹ לַעֲשׂוֹת כֵּן׃

וַתֹּאמֶר אֶסְתֵּר אִישׁ צַר וְאוֹיֵב הָמָן הָרָע הַזֶּה וְהָמָן נִבְעַת מִלִּפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהַמַּלְכָּה׃

> And the king again said to Esther at the second wine-feast: What would you ask of me, Esther [my] queen, and I will give to you; and what is your request? Ask for as much as half of my kingdom and it shall be done.
>
> And Queen Esther answered, saying: If I have found favor in your eyes, [my] king, and if it please Your Majesty, give me my soul as my ask and my people as my request.
>
> For we have been sold, me and my nation, to be destroyed, to be murdered, to be obliterated; if we had been sold as slaves, I would have remained silent because that pain would not be enough to trouble Your Majesty.
>
> And King Akhashverosh said to Queen Esther: Who is it, which [person] has the gall in his heart to do this?
>
> And Esther said: A man of misfortune and enmity, this Haman the wicked. And Haman cowered before the king and queen.[90]

For paratactic constructions, we have "a man of misfortune and enmity, this Haman the wicked," a rare sentence construct for ancient Hebrew, with no conjunctions connecting the clauses despite the *trop* (musical scoring that provides guidance for punctuation, further explored below) indicating a pause (and thus the end of a clause) on the word "enmity." In terms of deictics, Hebrew conjugation both complicates the matter and provides an array of examples because

[90] Esther 7:2-6, translation my own. For a more lyrical translation, see the my full translations below

words are often conjugated into the first, second, and third-person possessive rather than spelling out "your x" or "their y." In the case of the above passages, Akhashverosh asks Esther for "your ask" and "your request," to which she responds in kind regarding "my ask" and "my request," employing the second and first-person possessive conjugation, respectively. When placed in the context of English syntactic analysis, these could be categorized as deictics, referring explicitly to a speaker and addressee. As for pronominals, the line that exposes Haman as the wicked plotter contains the telltale "this," indicating a being present in the room with them to whom the speaker (Esther) is directing attention. The lines are complex, with one subject serving a slew of predicates rather than many separate constituents, and the final declaration of Haman as the "man of misfortune and enmity" serves as the exception to the overarching rule of shorter noun phrases that are utilized in this chapter and across the text. These hallmarks are present throughout *Esther*, consistently and continuously setting it apart from other Jewish biblical texts and aligning it with *Rut* instead. Paired with the lyrical, heightened quality of the language, which Giles and Doan point to in *Rut* as indicating at least a potential performance text,[91] the text of *Esther* meets the requirements that Giles and Doan use to reframe *Rut* as an embodied text.

Musical Scoring

In that vein, readings of *Esther* stand out from the public readings of other biblical texts, such as the weekly readings of the *parsha* as part of *Shabbat* and Monday/Thursday services. For all such readings, the way in which the text is chanted is dictated by the *trop*. Hebrew biblical texts were written with neither punctuation nor vowels (Hebrew, being an abjad, includes vowels more in the category of punctuation than letters). Every word in Hebrew has a three-letter "root," a base word from which different meanings, tenses, parts of speech, and associations can be

[91] Giles, Terry and William J. Doan, *The Story of Naomi – The Book of Ruth: From Gender to Politics*. Cascade Books, 26 January 2016, 70.

conjugated. Some conjugations appear nearly identical without their vowels, thereby calling into question which meaning is intended. The key to understanding such words without vowels is context within the given sentence. The trouble that arises in biblical texts is that the lack of punctuation not only means a lack of vowels but also of clear delineations of where sentences begin and end, making that context murky. The solution is *trop*. Inflection, pauses, stops, tone, indeed much of the structure of the texts, is derived from *trop*. *Trop* is akin to a musical score, symbols that represent musical notes or phrases to accompany each word in the text. *Trop* is not written in the texts themselves, either, but rather passed through oral and embodied tradition, taught by one generation to the next. Specialists such as *gabbais*,[92] *chazzans*,[93] and rabbis are charged with singing the texts for the congregation and teaching the next generation how to read, and thus understand, the text. Learning *trop* is also part of the rite of passage of the bar/bat mitzvah, the transition out of childhood into the age of communal and personal responsibility, so in theory each Jewish child is taught how to interpret the score of biblical texts and thereby engage with them with greater clarity. Textual interpretation is a cornerstone of Jewish practice and identity, rising exponentially in importance from the Second Temple Period into the Second Diaspora, but the key to obtain even a basic understanding of what is written in biblical texts lies in active, embodied engagement via *trop*. Therein, then, I see the seeds of performance.

There are, however, a variety of musical meanings behind the *trop*. The symbols stay the same, but what notes/phrases they represent varies from text to text, or rather section to section within the canon. The five Mosaic texts all share a score, so to speak, so the weekly *parsha* readings are sung in the same style, which is the simplest of the *trop* meanings, musically speaking. The next subsection of the canon, the books of *Navi*,[94] also shares a unified *trop* style,

[92] Sextons
[93] Cantors
[94] *Prophets*

which is used when they, too, are read aloud in portions for the congregation each week during *Shabbat* services as well as on holidays. Complications begin to arise with the subsection of *Ktuvim*,[95] specifically with the *trop* for the Five *Megillot*. *Rut* and *Eicha* each have their own melodies, used annually for their public readings on certain holy-days. *Esther* takes it to the next level: it is read with both its own *trop* melody and borrows from others. It is the only text in the canon that is read with a mixture of melodic meanings to the *trop* notations.

Containing lamentations that tell the story of the conquest and destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple within it, *Eicha* is a book of grief and mourning. The destruction followed a difficult siege and marked the fall of the Kingdom of Judea and the end of Israelite/Jewish self-rule in indigenous land for a century, as well as significant trauma and loss of life. That *megillah* is read aloud annually on the anniversary of the destruction, the ninth day of the month of Av, and has unique *trop* in a minor key that forms a mournful melody. That unique *trop* is also engaged in certain verses of *Esther*, shifting abruptly from the more uptempo *Esther trop* into the mournful tune. The instances of *Eicha* in *Esther* signify a tonal shift, a moment that holds reminders of the tragedy of the Babylonian conquest or the potential for a tragedy that would essentially complete the destruction with the genocide of the Jews in the Persian Empire, which at the time included Israel and all the territories to which Jews had been exiled by the conquering Babylonians. *Eicha trop* is employed in the verses describing the use of vessels stolen from the destroyed Temple,[96] Mordechai's backstory connecting him to the courtiers exiled in the first wave of Babylonian brutality,[97] the initial publication of Haman's genocidal decree,[98] the grief of the Jews receiving said decree,[99] Esther's decision to risk her life to save her people,[100] and her

[95] *Writings*, the subcategory of the *Tanakh* into which the *Megillot* are organized.
[96] Esther 1:7
[97] Esther 2:6
[98] Esther 3:15-4:1
[99] Esther 4:3
[100] Esther 4:16

ultimate plea to the king in which she spells out the looming destruction if he does not intervene.[101]

In the deployment of *Eicha trop*, I see a technique that is deeply emotionally evocative, jarring, theatrical. The melody plays on collective memory. Its use is not unlike invoking a musical theme that is culturally known today, a sort of communal nostalgia that evokes emotions associated with the context of that music. From national anthems to the *Star Wars* theme, certain musical motifs have the power to evoke affective responses in particular communities; in fact, the use of those musical themes can help foster or bolster a sense of unity through a sort of participatory storytelling in the group listening to that culturally evocative tune.[102] In the case of *Eicha*, its use in *Esther* is a reminder of national tragedies whose effects are still felt thousands of years later as well as the annual communal mourning that is experienced viscerally in the imposed suffering and discomfort of *Tisha B'Av* (fasting, not sitting or reclining on cushioned seats or beds, not bathing, and avoiding anything that provides comfort or evokes joy for 25 hours as part of the ritual mourning for the bloodshed and destruction wrought by the Babylonians as well as all of the antisemitic violence and persecution that has occurred and continues to occur in the intervening years, a docket of generational trauma that only grows with time). Interrupting the joy of *Purim*, the verses sung to *Eicha trop* serve as visceral reminders of the tragedies that have been and the complete genocide that almost was.

Furthermore, I interpret the incorporation of *Eicha trop* as not only evoking the semantic aural echo[103] of a melody associated with collective mourning, but also placing *Esther* into a larger narrative of breaking and rebuilding. *Esther* is the answer to the cry for salvation and

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[101] Esther 8:6
[102] Holyfield, Lori, Maggie Cobb, Kimberly Murray, and Ashleigh McKinzie. "Musical Ties That Bind: Nostalgia, Affect, and Heritage in Festival Narratives." *Symbolic Interaction* 36, no. 4, 2013, 457–8.
[103] Conrad, M., et al. "ERPs reveal an iconic relation between sublexical phonology and affective meaning." *Cognition*, Vol. 226, 2022.

return that comes at the end of *Eicha*:[104] the descendants of the traumatized exiles lamenting their lot in *Eicha* are saved in *Esther* and, according to the continuing mythos, ultimately allowed to return to indigenous rule in Israel by Esther and Akhashverosh's son who is born after the events of this *megillah*. *Esther* offers post-First Diasporic and Second Diasporic Jewish communities a means through which to collectively orient themselves.

In *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Sara Ahmed examines the phenomenology surrounding the orientation of queer bodies in social space, exploring the importance of point of view for minoritized groups to recategorize their identities in different terms than the dominant "normative" narrative that defines them as outsiders. I see this type of reorientation as key for Jewish identity formation, as a minoritized group from the period of the First Diaspora onward. The use of *Eicha* functions as a means to sonically bring Jewish communities back to the initial "moments of disorientation" of the destruction and exile depicted in *Eicha* so they "might learn what it means to be orientated in the first place,"[105] an affective tool through which Jews can redefine themselves in terms of their own history and collectivity rather than as Other to the diasporic setting in which they live.

In stark contrast to *Eicha*, the *trop* unique to *Esther* is itself uptempo and lively. The resulting melody of *Esther* is dynamic, having a particular "musical mobility"[106] that matches the narrative being conveyed. It is fast, with one section even requiring the reader to sing ten names in one breath, and contains more musical variation than other types of *trop* wherein a number of symbols represent similar musical phrases. In *Esther*, those symbols are more differentiated, each denoting clearly distinct notes or phrases, which themselves are dynamic. One oft-repeated *trop*

[104] See *Eicha* chapter regarding the closing call-and-response of that *megillah*
[105] Ahmed, Sara. "Introduction: Find Your Way." *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Duke University Press, 2006, 6.
[106] As is expounded upon in depth through a music theory lens by Yonatan Malin in the article "Eastern Ashkenazi Biblical Cantillation: An Interpretive Musical Analysis." *Yuval*, vol. X, 2016, Jewish Music Research Center.

symbol in *Esther* represents what is essentially a musical scale, which is sung on just one word each time. The *trop* style for the text also requires multiple key changes and musical chiasmas, creating a score of peaks and valleys, speedy sections that sound almost like short patter songs followed by the inevitable breathless gasps, and sudden affective thematic shifts. This *trop* is theatrical, dramatic.

Comparing Theatrical Conventions

I see that theatricality reflected in the structure of the text itself. In verse 6:6, the text includes an unusual turn of phrase:

"וַיֹּאמֶר הָמָן, בְּלִבּוֹ, לְמִי יַחְפֹּץ הַמֶּלֶךְ לַעֲשׂוֹת יְקָר, יוֹתֵר מִמֶּנִּי/

Haman says in his heart, 'To whom would the king desire to endear more than me?'"[107] In response to Akhashverosh inquiring what should be done for someone who has earned the king's favor, Haman "says in his heart" that the king must be referring to Haman himself with the intention of rewarding the vizier for his service to the crown. Until this point, *Esther* has followed the typical biblical convention of relaying what characters said aloud and perhaps what they felt, but not what they thought. Internal dialogue, as implied by the idiom of speaking in one's heart, is left out along with anything else that could not be perceived by a human observer conveying the story (feelings are included in conjunction with the outward expression of them, such as weeping or shouting). By including internal dialogue, the text of *Esther* resembles not the rest of the Hebrew biblical canon, but rather contemporaneous performance texts from neighboring Mediterranean societies.

In ancient Greek drama, one hallmark of the tragedies is the way in which named characters speak their internal monologue to the ever-present chorus or simply share their thoughts aloud with the audience. Such a practice can be seen in the works of Aeschylus, who, of

[107] Translation my own

the three great tragedians of Athens, lived most closely to the time to which the earliest surviving written copy of *Megillat Esther* is dated. In his *Oresteia* trilogy, Aeschylus displays both versions of Greek theatrical "heart-speaking:" Clytemnestra shares her murderous intent with the chorus before exiting to kill her husband, unencumbered by any response that sharing such an internal thought might normally elicit if it were truly spoken and heard,[108] and in the next play her son Orestes voices his entire train of thought alone on stage as he wonders about who approaches him and worries that yet another disaster is about to befall his doomed house.[109]

Greek characters, rather than a disconnected narrator, theatrically speak what they are thinking so as to loop in the audience, but it is done under the pretense that such thoughts are not actually heard by the other characters. Hebrew biblical texts have a "fourth wall;" even when commandments are issued, they are done so to a characterized gathering of Israelites or to specific individuals, and then they are extrapolated to apply to the reader as well in the codification of Jewish practice. There is not much precedent for asides, soliloquies, or other dramatically externalized internal thoughts. There are a select few instances in the entire biblical canon of the phrase deployed in *Esther* to describe Haman's aside, "[he][110] said in [his] heart," some of which could provide an alternative explanation for its use, others with a distinctly dramatic subtext.

The plurality of uses of the phrase "[he] said in [his] heart" in the Hebrew biblical canon are in the collection of *Tehillim*,[111] which are poems/songs that were historically performed in the Temple, accompanied by instruments. Authorship of most of the *Tehillim* is attributed to King

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[108] Aeschylus. *Agamemnon*. trans. by David Grene and Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, The University of Chicago Press (1989), 1057-58.
[109] Aeschylus. *The Libation Bearers*. trans. by David Grene and Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, The University of Chicago Press (1989), 10-17.
[110] Brackets here because the masculine and gender neutral are conjugated the same way in Hebrew, but there is not the same implication of gender neutrality when translating those conjugations into the necessarily separate English verbs, nouns, and pronouns.
[111] Psalms 1, 10, 14, 53.

David, whose mythos includes composition and a talent for playing instruments. Those attributed to the king begin with the phrase "*Mizmor l'David*/a tune for [or to] David," though whether that means he wrote those verses or they were dedicated to him has long been the subject of debate.[112] Whether or not King David actually wrote the *Tehillim*, I argue that such an attribution denotes an association with performance-based worship, which is further cemented by references in both biblical and talmudic texts to *Leviim*[113] singing *Tehillim* in the Temple.[114] These were songs sung to accompany rituals both day-to-day and celebratory, heard by Israelites who assembled there for communal festivals or personal worship.

There have been parallels drawn between the *Tehillim* and Greek public poetry as well, as expounded upon by Dr. Davida H. Charney, scholar of biblical studies and rhetoric. Charney notes the persuasive language in a number of the *Tehillim*, arguing that those verses align with the structure of texts spoken in public with the intention to convince a listener or listeners to act. In the case of the *Tehillim*, the specific listener being persuaded to act is God, though the humans who heard them were included in the performance in the same way that assembled Greeks were part of the public poetic addresses to leaders and gods. Whatever their aim, the *Tehillim* have a clear performative purpose that also served as a communal unifier, as Charney explains:

> The psalmists were poets and musicians who worked…to compose songs for use in the Temple in Jerusalem…Some of the 150 poems in the Book of Psalms are straightforward hymns of praise, clearly the expressions of a religious cultic assembly. But over a third of the psalms convey first-person expressions of thanksgiving, petition, or lament from individuals caught in the trials of daily life: aging or sickness, imprisonment, threats from neighborhood bullies and slanders from gossips, chicanery in business, or loss of faith in

[112] Jacobson, Joshua R. "Decoding the Secrets of the Psalms." *The Choral Journal* 56, no. 7, 2016, 22.
[113] Levites, members of the Tribe of Levi
[114] Jacobson, Joshua R. "Decoding the Secrets of the Psalms." *The Choral Journal* 56, no. 7, 2016, 27

> God's abiding presence. The psalms can be seen as arguments posed to God by Israelites, sometimes as individuals and sometimes as a community, over the continuation of their covenantal relationship. By composing, preserving, and adding to the Book of Psalms over several centuries, the psalmists used argument to foster the social and cultural cohesiveness of the Israelite community.[115]

I would add to Charney's argument that many Psalms begin with the phrase "*mizmor l-*" or "*shir l-/ha-*," meaning "a tune for" or "a song to/of," respectively, denoting the intention of public (and directed) musicality behind the passages and distinguishing the collection of *Tehillim* from other books in the canon. These are compositions meant to be performed, their lyricism intentional for the benefit of public consumption. Therefore, the plurality of the occurrences of "[x] said in [x's] heart]" are in conjunction with public performance.

Moving beyond *Tehillim* and *Esther*, I discovered that the only other uses of the phrase in the Hebrew biblical canon are in the context of conversations with God[116] or, in one instance, it is followed immediately by a sentence about someone hearing of the heart-speaker's feelings. The former calls into question whether there is any tangible difference between speaking aloud and speaking internally when one is engaged in dialogue with the omniscient divine, solving the question of why and how something said internally would be included within a narrative structured as if told without knowledge of individuals' thoughts. The latter use has the implication that the heart-speaker shared their thoughts aloud in some way as well, as is evidenced by the next sentence referring, in this one case, to the speaker's mother hearing what

[115] Charney, Davida H. "Performativity and Persuasion in the Hebrew Book of Psalms: A Rhetorical Analysis of Psalms 116 and 22." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 40, no. 3, 2010, 248.
[116] Genesis 27:41 and Obadiah 1:3.

he had been saying/feeling and taking action about it, thus retroactively justifying the inclusion of internal dialogue as the speaker thinking before he voices those same thoughts.[117]

Jewish theology rules out Haman's internal dialogue occurring as part of a prophetic/divine conversation because the villainous biblical figures are not granted direct word from God, which is viewed as a gift not given to those with evil intent. The remainder of the story in *Esther* contains literally the rest of Haman's life, in which he does not get the opportunity to express his heart-spoken thoughts aloud, which would have thereby retroactively explained the inclusion of a seemingly convention-breaking internal thought. The lines following the heart-speaking specify that Haman is now speaking aloud to the king, and it is only to these subsequent lines that Akhashverosh responds, and the king's response even directly contradicts Haman's internal thought without any reference to this being a contradiction. This leaves no room for Haman to have expressed his self-satisfied thoughts aloud in the moment, either, so the explanation of the internal also being made external does not fit the situation either. What remains to explain the use of the phrase "[he] said in [his] heart" is the dramatic: Haman is speaking in an aside.

The heart-speaking is not the only indication of theatricality behind the text of *Esther*. The structure of the text is unusual for biblical books, which are typically formatted like a cross between a history book and a written folktale, with a smattering of laws contained within the narratives. *Megillat Esther* is composed of poetic, fast-paced dialogue, lyrical descriptions, and short interstitial descriptions. It was the latter two that first stuck out to me, puzzlingly different from the lengthy but practical descriptions in the majority of the canon. Upon closer examination, the troubling descriptive passages fell into two possible categories: stage directions and chorus narration.

[117] Genesis 27:41-42.

In my analytical and translation efforts, I further divided the stage directions into two subcategories. The first group is the straightforward stage directions, indications that a character goes and relays information to another character, such as when the chamberlains repeat the refusal of Queen Vashti to Akhashverosh, or to denote the emotion of a line or action, such as Akhashverosh's subsequent anger at the queen.[118] In the aforementioned example, all of the action is contained in a single verse with no dialogue, just describing the movements of the characters and their sentiments. It is quick and to the point, leading into the next section of dialogue and beat of action and sidestepping repetition by spelling out the chamberlains' conveying of Vashti's message. Akhashverosh's anger colors both his next lines and the reactions of the chamberlains, whose understanding of the king's temper is noted as well, indicating that they know to prepare for his outburst. This verse can thus be read as a stage direction, both in terms of action and emotion, interrupting the flow as briefly as possible in order to set up the next beat.

Additionally, in the surrounding verses, the names of the chamberlains are listed out, establishing who is present in the scene even when they do not have lines. This, again, is not the typical practice in the Hebrew biblical canon, which tends to list only characters who are actively engaged in the dialogue of a scene. This practice of listing non-speaking characters in dialogue-driven scenes is reminiscent of stage directions as well: it establishes which actors are in the scene and, when combined with the note about the chamberlains' knowledge of the king's anger, indicates nonverbal responses which said actors can perform at their discretion.

The second subcategory of stage directions comes from the verses with short but lyrical descriptions of long sequences of events. These include the process in which the young, unmarried women of the kingdom partook in preparation for their presentation to the king in his

[118] Esther 1:12

search for a bride, contained in lines that scaffold an intricate and intense process as well as the formation of a small community of women who went through the ordeal.[119] There is a rhythm to those verses, both in the wording and the *trop*, a beat that carries in it hints of an entire story contained within the larger story. These were the stage directions that led me to movement and dance. For the short sequence of the women's preparation, I saw a connection to the *Tu B'Av*[120] traditions: a dance-based ritual of unmarried women seeking partners while also forging bonds with one another.

In the remainder of the lines that could be categorized as narration, I see the potential for chorus lines. When comparing the text to contemporaneous established performance texts, some sections resembled choral narration or the dialogue between the chorus and either a chorus leader (coryphaeus) or a named character. In terms of the former, sections of poetic narration help move along the story of *Esther*, such as the opening lines establishing the setting of Akhashverosh's reign and the feast that opens the action:

וַיְהִ֣י בִימֵ֗י אֲחַשְׁוֵרֹ֤וש הוּא֙ אֲחַשְׁוֵרֹ֔וש הַמֹּלֵ֖ךְ מֵהֹדּ֣וּ וְעַד־כּ֑וּש שֶׁ֥בַע וְעֶשְׂרִ֖ים וּמֵאָ֥ה מְדִינָֽה׃

בַּיָּמִ֣ים הָהֵ֔ם כְּשֶׁ֥בֶת ׀ הַמֶּ֖לֶךְ אֲחַשְׁוֵרֹ֑וש עַל֙ כִּסֵּ֣א מַלְכוּת֔וֹ אֲשֶׁ֖ר בְּשׁוּשַׁ֥ן הַבִּירָֽה׃

בִּשְׁנַ֣ת שָׁלוֹשׁ֮ לְמָלְכוֹ֒ עָשָׂ֣ה מִשְׁתֶּ֔ה לְכָל־שָׂרָ֖יו וַעֲבָדָ֑יו חֵ֣יל ׀ פָּרַ֗س וּמָדַי֙ הַפַּרְתְּמִ֣ים וְשָׂרֵ֔י הַמְּדִינ֖וֹת לְפָנָֽיו׃

בְּהַרְאֹ֗תוֹ אֶת־עֹ֚שֶׁר כְּב֣וֹד מַלְכוּת֔וֹ וְאֶת־יְקַ֖ר תִּפְאֶ֣רֶת גְּדוּלָּת֑וֹ יָמִ֥ים רַבִּ֛ים שְׁמוֹנִ֥ים וּמְאַ֖ת יֽוֹם׃

וּבִמְלֹ֣את ׀ הַיָּמִ֣ים הָאֵ֗לֶּה עָשָׂ֤ה הַמֶּ֙לֶךְ֙ לְכָל־הָעָ֣ם הַנִּמְצְאִ֔ים בְּשׁוּשַׁ֖ן הַבִּירָ֑ה לְמִגָּדוֹל֙ וְעַד־קָטָ֔ן מִשְׁתֶּ֥ה שִׁבְעַ֖ת יָמִ֑ים

בַּחֲצַ֣ר גִּנַּ֔ת בִּיתַ֖ן הַמֶּֽלֶךְ׃

חוּר ׀ כַּרְפַּ֣س וּתְכֵ֗לֶת אָחוּז֙ בְּחַבְלֵי־בוּץ֙ וְאַרְגָּמָ֔ן עַל־גְּלִילֵ֥י כֶ֖סֶף וְעַמּוּדֵ֣י שֵׁ֑שׁ מִטּ֤וֹת ׀ זָהָב֙ וָכֶ֔סֶף עַל֙ רִצְפַ֣ת בַּהַט־וָשֵׁ֔שׁ

וְדַ֖ר וְסֹחָֽרֶת׃

וְהַשְׁקוֹת֖ בִּכְלֵ֣י זָהָ֑ב וְכֵלִ֣ים מִכֵּלִ֔ים שׁוֹנִ֖ים וְיַ֣יִן מַלְכ֔וּת רָ֖ב כְּיַ֥ד הַמֶּֽלֶךְ׃

[119] Esther 1:8-9, 12-14.

[120] The 15th of Av, see *Shir HaShirim* chapter for a more in-depth examination of the semi-defunct holiday and its rituals, origins, and possible deeper connections to the *Megillot*.

וְהַשְּׁתִיָּה כַדָּת אֵין אֹנֵס כִּי־כֵן ו יִסַּד הַמֶּלֶךְ עַל כָּל־רַב בֵּיתוֹ לַעֲשׂוֹת כִּרְצוֹן אִישׁ־וָאִישׁ׃

גַּם וַשְׁתִּי הַמַּלְכָּה עָשְׂתָה מִשְׁתֵּה נָשִׁים בֵּית הַמַּלְכוּת אֲשֶׁר לַמֶּלֶךְ אֲחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ׃[121]

In the days of Akhashverosh, Ashashverosh, the king from India to Ethiopia, seven and twenty and one hundred nations.

In those days, when King Akhashverosh sat on his throne in Shushan, the capital.

In the third year of his reign, he threw a feast for all of his officers and his servants, the administrators from Persia and Media, the nobles and governors of all the provinces in his domain

To show off the wealth of his honored reign and the dear glory of his greatness, for many days, eighty and one hundred days.

At the end of those days, the king held for everyone who resided in Shushan, from the oldest to the youngest, a feast of seven days in the courtyard of the king's palace.

[Tapestries] of white cotton and blue wool tied with cords of linen and purple wool on rods of silver and columns of alabaster, couches of gold and silver on floors of marble and alabaster and mother-of-pearl and mosaics.

And they [were served] drinks in vessels of gold and vessels of all sorts and the royal wine flowed heavily at the command of the king.

And the rules of drinking were "no restrictions" because the king had ordered all his household servants to fulfill the wishes of each individual man.

Also Vashti the queen threw a feast for the women in the royal palace of King Akhashverosh.[122]

[121] Esther 1:1-9.

[122] My translation, here again more word-for-word than my overall translation below, wherein I attempt to better capture the lyricism of the original text and accompanying *trop*.

These opening lines are infused with vivid detail as well as historical context, giving the audience a clear picture of when and where they are in real or mythological time and space. The poetic language in this passage sounds similar to the rich similes of *Shir HaShirim* in which the central lovers describe one another's bodies in language dripping with desire. The details of this opening exposition are vivid, the language infused with a sort of overawing excess with repeated bursts of royal colors and gold vessels flowing at the command of the king. Elements of these descriptions can also be found in descriptions of the *Mishkan*[123] and King Shlomo's Temple, albeit in more methodical language that I read as more akin to an architectural guide than affective catalyst. Drawing upon colors and materials connected to both royalty and religious reverence brings an audience familiar with Jewish mythos into that legendary past.

Analyzing these lines alongside ancient Athenian plays reveals a number of similarities. Compare the opening lines of *Esther* to the chorus's introductory lines in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*:

> Ten livelong years have rolled away,
> Since the twin lords of sceptred sway,
> By Zeus endowed with pride of place,
> The doughty chiefs of Atreus' race,
> Went forth of yore,
> To plead with Priam, face to face,
> Before the judgment-seat of War![124]

[123] Tabernacle, the portable proto-Temple first built in the wilderness following the Exodus from Egypt and transported into Israel where it remained the center of communal worship until King Shlomo built the permanent structure of the Temple.
[124] Aeschylus. *The Oresteia*, translated by E. D. A. Morshead. Dover Publication, 1996, v.

After establishing when the story is taking place, like in *Esther*, the chorus in *Agamemnon* goes on to lay the scene with visceral and poetic detail, evoking the collective memory of events that are cultural touchstones – the tragedy-tinged tale of the Trojan War – without delving fully into the story, relying on the audience's familiarity with the references. Similarly, the opening lines of *Esther* are infused with emotional evocations of cultural memory: the line detailing the rich vessels in which Akhashverosh served wine are traditionally sung with the *Eicha trop*, invoking the story of the destruction and exile, putting the *Esther* story in context and hinting at a legend that the vessels from Shlomo's Temple ended up in the treasury (and at the feasting tables) of the Persian kings. Both choruses set the stage for the story, pulling the audience in with graphic imagery, touching on familiar tales to set the context and emotional as well as national stakes, and establishing a lyrical tone.

I see in this opening exposition and evocation a connection to Ernest Renan's "What Is a Nation?" in which he posits that a nation is formed through a need for collective identity and that the "common effort" of working through suffering and grief together has a unifying power balanced with the necessity of forgetfulness for united identity formation.[125] In this case, the memory of the destruction of the First Temple serves as a unifying point of shared suffering that also obviates the individual points of pain endured by different exilic groups in the Diaspora. This imagery set to the *Eicha* melody carries with it the memory of shared trauma that overrides the more distinct memories that might serve to divide the Jewish people.

Returning to the concept of chorus, the passages in which I see the potential to reframe them as chorus lines also include the lyrical recitation of backstory with each introduction of a new major character, which is similar to the way in which new characters are introduced in

[125] Renan, Ernest, and M. F. N. Giglioli. "What Is a Nation? (Qu'est-ce Qu'une Nation?" *What Is a Nation? And Other Political Writings*. Columbia University Press, 2018, 247-263.

Greek plays, giving context to historical and mythological figures when they enter, bringing an audience immediately up to speed through collective common knowledge. This serves as a sort of insider's cue, particularly with the first lines introducing Mordechai, the first of which is recited in unison by the congregation then repeated by the reader and the second sung to the *Eicha* tune (which also positions it, by my analytical qualifications, as a chorus line rather than a stage direction):

> אִישׁ יְהוּדִי הָיָה בְּשׁוּשַׁן הַבִּירָה וּשְׁמוֹ מָרְדֳּכַי בֶּן יָאִיר בֶּן־שִׁמְעִי בֶּן־קִישׁ אִישׁ יְמִינִי׃
>
> /אֲשֶׁר הָגְלָה מִירוּשָׁלַיִם עִם־הַגּוֹלָה אֲשֶׁר הָגְלְתָה עִם יְכָנְיָה מֶלֶךְ־יְהוּדָה אֲשֶׁר הָגְלָה נְבוּכַדְנֶצַּר מֶלֶךְ בָּבֶל
>
> A Jewish/Judean man was in Shushan the capital, and his name is Mordechai, son of Yair, son of Shimmi, son of Keesh, a Benjamanite man who was exiled from Jerusalem with the [wave of] exiles who were expelled with Yechonya, King of Judea, whom Nevuchadnezzer, king of Babylon, exiled.[126]

Compare that with the chorus' introduction of Ajax in the Sophocles play by the same name:

> Son of Telamon, lord of the firm floor
>
> Of Salamis, where the sea chafes and swirls,
>
> Ajax, my lord,
>
> When you are fortunate, I too feel gladness;
>
> But when the fury of Zeus or the virulent
>
> Slur of the Greeks' slander
>
> Strikes you, I shrink in fear…[127]

In both *Esther* and *Ajax*, a heroic figure is introduced to the audience after the action of the play has begun, with his introduction interrupting the action. The chorus provides lineage and enough

[126] Esther 2:5-6, translation my own, again in this case not totally capturing the vibe of the Hebrew but aiming to more precisely translate the individual words for the sake of analysis here.
[127] Sophocles. *Ajax*, translated by John Moore, The University of Chicago Press, 1957, 13.

backstory for the audience to put them into context with the help of cultural knowledge. At the same time, these lines provide the audience with emotional cues. In the case of the *Esther*, the reverse call-and-response cues the audience in that they should be connecting with this character, while the *Eicha trop* evokes melancholy and, paired with the line detailing Mordechai's tragic backstory, it positions him as a sympathetic figure who shares the nation's struggles as one who carries within him vivid cultural and personal memories of exile. Similarly, Ajax is set up as a figure with whom the chorus – and thus, by proxy, the audience – empathizes. Like Mordechai, Ajax is both an underdog and a person of status worthy of respect. The chorus thereby serves as an introductory force and audience surrogate, not an objective narrator, but a character turning those gathered from viewers into a congregation.

Participatory elements that make the community part of the chorus, in a way, tie back to the potential purpose of this piece being (re)unification in light of the participatory elements of the City Dionysia that were deployed for the same purpose, such as participation in the chorus across classes.[128] The story is thereby made immediate, fulfilling the edict of "נִזְכָּרִים וְנַעֲשִׂים/remember[ing] and enact[ing]"[129] the story of Esther, as well as allowing the story to serve as a point of collective hope in moments of national fear and crisis. This mirrors the function of the chorus in ancient Athenian drama as outlined by David Pritchard in his analysis of the function and power of participation in the Dionysian dithyramb:

> …no matter who the chorus was pretending to be in the drama itself, they were always also Athenian male citizens making a choral performance in a festival dedicated to Dionysus, the dancing god par excellence…This instability of the chorus's identity and of the field of reference for their voices contributes to their mediating function in drama,

[128] Pritchard, David. "Kleisthenes, Participation, and the Dithyrambic Contests of Late Archaic and Classical Athens." *Phoenix*, vol. 58, no. 3/4, 2004, 210-11.
[129] Esther 9:28.

> and this can be shown to operate on many levels. Deictic particles, for example, that refer to "this here city" can have the uncanny effect of applying both to Athens and the fictive setting of the play, in this way drawing connections between the "here and now" of the audience of the play and the "then and there" of the actors on the stage.[130]

This is the case in *Esther*. The story is not just being read or recited: it is being reenacted, relived, re-embodied, and the chorus helps break the fourth wall, bringing the audience into the world of the story and the story into the world of the audience.

The chorus also engages in conversations with named characters, offering yet another connection to theatrical conventions in that this is a common device employed across Athenian drama as well. There are far more named, active minor characters in *Esther* than tend to appear in the typical biblical narrative. Kharvona and Memukhan are both advisors to Akhashverosh who appear in one scene each and purely move the plot forward with their knowledge and suggestions: they operate as linchpins, of sorts. They, along with Esther's messenger Hatakh and the other advisors to the king who are explicitly named in the first chapter of *Esther*, fall into a category of figures who would typically go unnamed. Minor characters whose entire role is to relay information are referred to as only "a messenger" or "an advisor" by the standard of the majority of the canon, yet here they are each given a name along with their role. This could then be seen as members of the chorus stepping out, clearly delineating that they are now this specific, named character rather than a part of the unnamed masses – the statement and repetition of their names hints at a need to remind the audience whom they are playing for this scene, a need that would not arise if one were merely reading the text.

Esther: Acting and Embodying

[130] Nimis, Stephen. "Theban Autochthony and Athenian Ideology in the *Phoenissae* of Euripides." *Mediterranean Studies*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2017, 152.

The unusual inclusion of names highlights, to me, the exclusion of another name. Despite the commandments at the end of the *megillah* being considered "*mitzvot*"[131] on par with others from the biblical canon, they are all decrees from the human figures in the story (Esther and Mordechai) rather than decidedly divine commandments, as are found in other biblical books. Esther and Mordechai step into the role of divine vessels by issuing these *mitzvot*, emphasized by the decrees' "function as virtual speech acts,"[132] per Levy, which serves to further tie them to the explicitly divine orders present across the *Tanakh*, bolstered as well by the acceptance of this set of human-written *mitzvot* as worthy of that category by subsequent exegetes and rabbinic authorities in the Talmud and onward.

Though the *Purim* practices set down by Esther and Mordechai are elevated to the level of those believed to be direct from God, any divine involvement in their establishment is at most implied by their acceptance. In fact, even though the story is regarded as a holy tale of miracles, there is not a single explicit inclusion of God in the text: unlike the majority of texts in the Hebrew biblical canon, none of God's names is used in *Megillat Esther*. There is a rule in Judaism regarding speaking God's name aloud: one is supposed to do so only in prayer or when reading a full, uninterrupted sentence from the Bible. In the absence of any of God's names coupled with the performative elements of the text, I find a useful application of the unusual omission: preventing performers from violating the aforementioned rule as part of a traditionally interactive, and therefore repeatedly interrupted, performance.

Rather than God or a prophet explicitly driving the story, *Esther* centers its titular character as the vessel and enactor of the ultimate national salvation. Though it is never stated outright in the text, the liturgy surrounding the *Esther* refers to the rescue of the Jews from

[131] Literally "those which are commanded," "*mitzvot*" (plural of "*mizvah*") can refer to actual biblical commandments, rabbinic decrees, or good behavior toward others/the environment/the community/etc.
[132] Levy, Shimon. "Esther and the Head of the Scepter." *The Bible as Theatre*. Sussex Academic Press, 2000, 114.

genocide as a miracle, with Esther as the means by which it was achieved.[133] Within the text itself, Mordechai urges Esther to intervene on behalf of the Jews by asserting the potential hand of destiny:

כִּי אִם-הַחֲרֵשׁ תַּחֲרִישִׁי, בָּעֵת הַזֹּאת--רֶוַח וְהַצָּלָה יַעֲמוֹד לַיְּהוּדִים מִמָּקוֹם אַחֵר, וְאַתְּ וּבֵית-אָבִיךְ תֹּאבֵדוּ; וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ--אִם-לְעֵת כָּזֹאת, הִגַּעַתְּ לַמַּלְכוּת

> Because if you stay silent and do not speak up in this moment, respite and rescue will arise for the Jews from a different source, and you and your father's house will be lost; and who knows if it was for this moment that you ascended to monarchy?[134]

Following this line, I noticed that Esther's dialogue becomes more active, full of command conjugations, as well as longer lines that balance eloquent lyricism and political artfulness. Embracing her destiny and taking the fate of the Jews into her hands serves as the turning point in Esther's story when she truly becomes the protagonist.

This idea of destiny, of a divine plan operating with and through the protagonist, is a familiar one in the world of ancient Mediterranean performance. It can be seen in surrounding cultures' public performances, both political and explicitly theatrical (i.e., Greek drama). Whether it is framed as "you can't escape the Fates" or "I am the destined savior of Egypt," destiny and divine plan are all over contemporaneous public performances.

This idea of divinely-driven destiny was used by pharaohs in the neighboring kingdom of Egypt to bolster their claims to the throne, especially in moments of national crisis. When Hatshepsut unexpectedly became the sole ruler of Egypt in the 1400s BCE, she staved off panic

[133] See "עַל הַנִּסִּים/For the Miracles" – the song of gratitude sung throughout Purim in which Esther and Mordechai are hailed as vessels of the miracle, and "שׁוֹשַׁנַּת יַעֲקֹב/The Rose of Jacob" – the song sung following the communal reading of *Esther*, in which Esther and Mordechai are blessed as heroes.
[134] Esther 4:14, translation my own.

and shook off the shadow of tragedy that had struck her brothers by staging herself as the vessel for fate. Whenever she made a big political move or decision, Hatshepsut deployed her network of priests to demonstrate that the pharaoh was exercising the will of the gods.[135] By contemporaneous understandings of the world, fate and divine will dictated every aspect of life, and monarchs were understood to be god's divine presence on earth. Hatshepsut tapped into that perception and played into it. This involved public performances, monuments, pageantry, and ritual all pointing toward her as destiny incarnate, there to save her people from ruin and uncertainty. The precedent for a divinely-destined hero-queen had been set and followed in Egypt for centuries by the time Esther's story was first recorded just a short distance across the Mediterranean Sea. Pair this with Athenian dramas steeped in heroes fighting or embodying destiny, and the stage is set for Esther embracing her fate and becoming the vessel for her people's destiny in that critical moment wherein she takes the reins of her story. Both Hatshepsut's and Esther's actions imply a doubleness, at least a partial understanding of themselves as mere humans with the power to perform divine destiny in order to lead a people who fully bought into the concept.

Henceforward in the story, Esther takes on the role of her people's representative. In the line immediately following Mordechai's invocation of destiny, Esther lays out her plan to save the Jews, laying her own life on the line and using her own body to channel their pain and bring about their salvation:

לֵךְ֙ כְּנ֣וֹס אֶת־כָּל־הַיְהוּדִ֔ים הַנִּמְצְאִ֖ים בְּשׁוּשָׁ֑ן וְצ֣וּמוּ֙ עָלַ֔י וְאַל־תֹּאכְל֥וּ וְאַל־תִּשְׁתּ֖וּ שְׁלֹ֣שֶׁת יָמִ֑ים לַ֤יְלָה וָיוֹם֙ גַּם־אֲנִ֣י

וְנַעֲרֹתַ֔י אָצ֖וּם כֵּ֑ן וּבְכֵ֞ן אָבֹ֣וא אֶל־הַמֶּ֗לֶךְ אֲשֶׁ֤ר לֹא־כַדָּת֙ וְכַאֲשֶׁ֣ר אָבַ֔דְתִּי אָבָ֖דְתִּי/

[135] Cooney, Kara. *When Women Ruled the World*: *Six Queens of Egypt*. National Geographic, 2018, 136.

> Go assemble all the Jews in Shushan and fast for me, don't eat or drink for three days and nights; I, too, and my ladies will fast thusly, and then I will go to the king against the rules, and if I am lost, I am lost[136][137]

Esther is not only commanding the nation, she is asking them for their embodied faith. Fasting serves as a form of prayer and conferring their hopes in Esther, embodied suffering now to avoid imposed suffering later, especially when paired with associated practices of dressing in mourning attire and refraining from pleasure or even comfort. Esther's joining in the fast joins her with the nation, blurring the boundaries between their bodies as they enact, perform, and experience suffering for the sake of salvation together.

The last few words of Esther's plan, "וְכַאֲשֶׁר אָבַדְתִּי אָבָדְתִּי/If I am lost, I am lost," are sung with *Eicha trop*, bringing back the air of tragedy. Everywhere else in *Esther*, *Eicha* is only invoked when the lines being sung deal with national tragedy – the destruction and exile or the potential genocide. Even the line introducing Mordechai as a tragic figure connected to the exiled court, which prompts the audience to empathize with him, still describes a loss greater than his own. I posit that the *Eicha trop* is used with Mordechai to signal that his tragedy is part of the larger tragedy all the Jews have experienced; the *Eicha trop* is used with Esther to signal that her tragedy would be a tragedy for all the Jews. The phrase sung in the mournful tune is about her death alone, but the use of *Eicha trop* draws a comparison between her destruction and the destruction of the nation, since it is only deployed for tragedy on a national scale.

This idea of Esther as the stand-in for the whole Jewish people, the one embodying the many, is carried through to her ultimate revelation of identity. When she asks Akhashverosh to save the Jews, she phrases it first as a request for her own salvation from her enemy:

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[136] Esther 4:16, translation my own.
[137] See the script of *Esther* for the lyrical version of this highly evocative line.

אִם-מָצָאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ הַמֶּלֶךְ, וְאִם-עַל-הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב: תִּנָּתֶן-לִי נַפְשִׁי בִּשְׁאֵלָתִי, וְעַמִּי בְּבַקָּשָׁתִי/

If I have found favor in the eyes of the king, and if the king finds it good, give me my soul for my request and my nation for my entreaty.[138]

Nearly half of the sentence is conjugated in the personal possessive, which creates a sort of alliteration as the suffix is repeated over and over, affirming that this is her personal, individual request, risk, pain, and need. Esther faces the king and uses herself, her own body that might have otherwise been safe if she had continued to keep her identity a secret, as the stand-in for her whole nation, throwing her lot in with them and risking herself as the first casualty if her plan goes awry.

In this plan, Esther's two bodies become legible: her own and her body politic. In her article "The State Is a Man," Audra Simpson analyzes the impossibility of "reconciliation" in light of ongoing colonial violence, focusing in particular on the disappeared bodies of Indigenous women in North America. I see in Esther's actions a parallel to one of Simpson's two central case studies, that of Chief Theresa Spence. Chief Spence's story situates another native woman leader's doubled body as proffered sacrifice for her people to save them from imperial/colonial power and, in doing so, her feminized and racialized material form served as a site of both conflict and resistance. Simpson examines the powerful way in which "The Chief's two bodies (Indigenous and female) signaled too much for a settler eye and imagination to hear let alone act upon, and were she to have died, her body would have been in fact, the eliminatory logic of the state laid bare, and made all too real."[139] In the case of this *megillah*, Esther is an indigenous figure in enforced exile (whose immediate ancestors were subjected to forced relocation) from her land who, like Chief Spence, is facing down the embodiment of the heteropatriarchal state

[138] Esther 7:3, translation my own.
[139] Simpson, Audra. "The State is a Man: Theresa Spence, Loretta Saunders and the Gender of Settler Sovereignty." *Theory & Event*, Baltimore Vol. 19, Iss. 4, 2016, 17.

built upon violence that is oppressing and attempting to obliterate her people. By choosing tactics that place emphasis on her body, Esther is engaging in a similar form of resistance to Chief Spence by using the doubled form in which she is subjugated in this societal structure as the battlefield on which she fights for her people.

This stand-in gamble begins before the feast: when Esther first approaches Akhashverosh following the three days of fasting, she has not been invited and so risks execution according to the rules of the Persian court. Her salvation comes in the form of the ceremonial extension of the king's golden scepter, an indication that her uninvited presence is welcome. The sequence of the scepter appears twice in the *megillah*, both times following the same order of events with Esther styling herself in a way that appeals to her husband, kneeling before his throne, the king extending the scepter for her to grasp, and him raising her to her feet before asking what she desires of him.[140] It is a performance within the performance, one of a courtly/political nature that plays into the king's power, his own performative machismo,[141] and thus his ego before Esther asks a favor of him.

Esther does not simply go through the fasting, dressing up, and kneeling for the scepter and then state her intent: she adds more performance to her performance by putting on two feasts before unmasking herself. She plays into what has twice before been shown to be something Akhashverosh enjoys, as evidenced by the anniversary feasting and the feast to celebrate marrying Esther. This also gives us the Rule of Three, another theatrical convention in which the pattern of a thrice-repeated event or phrase is used both to place emphasis and engage the audience, particularly when the third instance contains a twist. In this case Esther's is the third of

[140] Esther 5:1-3 and 8:3-4
[141] Levy, Shimon. "Esther and the Head of the Scepter." *The Bible as Theatre*. Sussex Academic Press, 2000, 109.

three feasts in the narrative and the twist is the fakeout of the request for the feast to continue the next day, followed therein by the revelation of identity.

The seeds have been sown for Esther being a savvy performer by the time the story reaches its climactic reveal. Almost immediately after she is introduced, she changes her identity at Mordechai's urging in order to hide her Jewishness when she is called to the king with the rest of the unmarried women. From that point on, she not only hides who she is, but also deftly performs femininity as it is expected of her by the king.

This series of enactments of societal expectations leapt out to me as deeply connected to Judith Butler's positioning of gender as a series of performances of self scaffolded on the beliefs held by observers. Though Butler later revised their overall argument regarding gender as a performance that an individual controls, their concept surrounding the ways in which one presents and positions one's body remains relevant. Esther engages in an ongoing and adapting "stylization of the body,"[142] transforming her performance of femininity to match the circumstances and her objectives within them. It is implied that the other women adorned themselves as they liked before going to meet the king, but Esther styled herself strictly as she was advised by Hegai, a member of the king's household and thus in the know about Akhashverosh's preferences and expectations.[143] Her strategy works – she is chosen from among all the women to be the next queen, and she carries her performance of demure beauty adhering to Akhashverosh's desires through the remainder of her interactions with him. Esther performs femininity for her husband as if she could have read Judith Butler: she presents him with "a compelling illusion, an object of belief,"[144] allowing him to project his ideal woman onto her and

[142] Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4, 1988, 519.
[143] Esther 2:12-15.
[144] Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 6à, no. 6 (December 233), 1988, 520.

reflecting that back at him. She dresses with care before going to see him uninvited, she plays into his desire to be served and flattered, and she even performs the role of helpless damsel when the audience knows her to be far from weak. Esther counterbalances her performed frailty with an added layer of stylization to remind Akhashverosh of the status to which he elevated her. The "stage directions" for her preparation to approach the king use a striking turn of phrase: "וַתִּלְבַּשׁ אֶסְתֵּר֙ מַלְכ֔וּת/And Esther donned royalty."[145] She has styled herself not just as a Persian woman, but as a queen.

Esther's dialogue throughout her extended performance scaffolding her request to save her people further highlights the ways in which she chooses to wield regality to win over Akhashverosh. She repeats the refrain "אִם־עַל־הַמֶּ֙לֶךְ֙ טָ֔וֹב/If it is good for the king"[146] before each of her requests (the two invitations and the plea for the lives of the Jews). This language not only plays into Akhashverosh's own sense of self-aggrandizement (this is, after all, the man who threw himself a weeklong feast for being king), but it is also highly formalized. When the king asks Esther for her request at the first wine banquet, Esther begins by repeating and revising his own words to stroke his ego and play on pathos.[147] Esther masterfully adorns her performance with eloquent verbal etiquette interspersed with moments of intimacy as she shifts between royal third person and emotional first person, as Levy notes: "It is a smart, manipulated rhetorical tactic to stimulate the king's sensitivities through alternately approaching and alienating him."[148] Viewing Esther's actions through the lens of Butler's "stylization" of her body to perform Akhashverosh's conceptualization of (royal) femininity and Levy's analysis of her dance of formality and informality across her three-step plan reveals a combination of curated intimacy

[145] Esther 5:1, translation my own.
[146] Esther. 5:4, 5:8, and 7:3, translation my own.
[147] Levy, Shimon. "Esther and the Head of the Scepter." *The Bible as Theatre*. Sussex Academic Press, 2000, 111.
[148] Ibid., 112.

with cultivated courtly arts that enables Esther to enact of performance not only of queen, but also of king's wife.

It is this performance that Esther deploys to help hammer the final nail into Haman's coffin and to get the king to permit the Jews to defend themselves. After Esther's revelation, Akhashverosh goes to the gardens to cool off, at which point Haman falls on Esther's couch to beg for mercy, only for Akhashverosh to return and accuse Haman of trying to assault the queen. The interaction between Esther and Haman is described only through action, leading Levy to refer to it as a silent scene within a scene.[149] In this shift, I see Esther as following her powerful rhetorical performance by switching tactics to wield the weapon of silence. When Akhashverosh returns from the garden and interprets the worst from the scene in front of him, Esther says nothing to contradict his perception. In fact, she says nothing at all, but lets her husband rage:

וְהַמֶּלֶךְ שָׁב מִגִּנַּת הַבִּיתָן אֶל-בֵּית מִשְׁתֵּה הַיָּיִן, וְהָמָן נֹפֵל עַל-הַמִּטָּה אֲשֶׁר אֶסְתֵּר עָלֶיהָ, וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ,
הֲגַם לִכְבּוֹשׁ אֶת-הַמַּלְכָּה עִמִּי בַּבָּיִת/

And the king returns from the courtyard garden into the wine feast, and Haman has fallen on the couch on which Esther reclines; and the king says, 'Will you also assault [lit. "conquer"] the Queen, with me in the house!?'[150]

Reclining in silent inaction, already dressed up and serving as hostess, Esther plays into a performance of damsel-in-distress and incites Akhashverosh's gallant ire. She has staged the two things Akhashverosh has been established as desiring from the very first verses: a feast and a beautiful wife on display at said feast (refusing to be put on display at a feast had even been the previous queen's downfall).[151] Haman threatens that ideal in his apparent assault on the king's

[149] Levy, Shimon. "Esther and the Head of the Scepter." *The Bible as Theatre*. Sussex Academic Press, 2000, 113.
[150] Esther 7:8, translation my own. For the sake of analyzing this passage, I have aimed to translate the text as close to the words as possible, this time including both the literal and metaphorical meaning of Akhashverosh's accusation.
[151] Esther 1:11.

lady, who chooses not to challenge that appearance, setting the stage for the return of the already-irate king to find his fallen vizier in the act of attacking the demure, ultra-feminine queen. The king immediately orders Haman's execution. Esther repeats this damsel-in-distress performance in the second scepter sequence, when she pleads with Akhashverosh to allow the Jews to defend themselves, falling on her knees, weeping, and appealing to his authority and magnanimity.[152] Once again, it works: Akhashverosh is compelled to rescue his fair lady and allows her and Mordechai to save their people.

The Collective and the Carnivalesque

Esther ends with commandments regarding the practices involved in observing the holiday of *Purim*,[153] chief among which is the edict for the story to be "נִזְכָּרִים וְנַעֲשִׂים/remembered and enacted."[154] Included in those commandments is the instruction to commemorate the events related in the *megillah* with feasting, joy, and community.[155] Within the Talmud, those commandments were unpacked, analyzed, and concretized into more specific practices, including reading *Esther* for each congregation, a feast that includes bread,[156] and possibly drinking to the point of excess.

At the center of *Purim* lie two key elements: community and inversion. The latter is encapsulated in the phrase taken from *Esther* and celebrated as the heart of *Purim* festivities: "וְנַהֲפוֹךְ הוּא(*ve'nahafokh hu*)/and it was switched to the opposite:"[157]

[152] Esther 8:3-4.
[153] Named for the lots that Haman drew in order to determine the date of his planned genocide.
[154] Esther 9:28.
[155] Esther 9:21-28.
[156] Within Judaism, bread has a special pair of blessings and rituals that precede and follow eating it, and as such can be used to elevate a meal into an event tinged with tradition and holiness (and extend the meal in length).
[157] Esther 9:1.

> The phrase *venahafokh hu* [*sic*] has become a slogan for the day, routinely called out at popular celebrations as audiences encourage actors in their dramas, entertainers in their parodies, and each other in boisterous celebrations.[158]

The concept of "*ve'nahafokh hu*" aligns with Mikhail Bakhtin's "logic of the 'inside out,' of the 'turnabout'"[159] in his exploration of the carnival, the topsy turvy. Applying the logic of Bakhtin deepens my positioning of *Esther* itself is a story of turnabout, of a great reversal of fortune "from despair to joy, from grief to good times."[160] It even includes several feasts that lead to revival and rebirth, both hallmarks of Bakhtin's carnival:

> The feast is always essentially related to time, either to the recurrence of an event in the natural (cosmic) cycle…or to historic timeliness. Moreover, through all the stages of historic development, feasts were linked to moments of crisis, of breaking points in the cycle of nature or in the life of society and man. Moments of death and revival, of change and renewal always led to a festive perception of the world. These moments, expressed in concrete form, created the peculiar character of the feasts.[161]

The feasts and revival within the *Esther* story are commemorated annually with more feasts, as is dictated by Esther and Mordechai in the text.[162] These are moments wherein time collapses, the past is re-embodied through the practices of *Purim* as the crisis and subsequent renewal experienced by the Jews in *Esther* are recalled and held up as a point of hope in the face of contemporaneous crises and threats to Jewish survival. Through the darkness, there can be joy, and the festival and feast of *Purim* serves as an embodied reminder of that.

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[158] Rubenstein, Jeffrey. "Purim, Liminality, and Communitas." *AJS Review*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1992, 253.
[159] Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Helene Iswolsky, Indiana University Press, 1965, 11.
[160] Esther 9:22.
[161] Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Helene Iswolsky, Indiana University Press, 1965, 9.
[162] Esther 9:19.

Furthermore, aligning with Bakhtin's requirement that carnival temporarily collapses all hierarchies,[163] the feast of *Purim* is communal and requires all to come to the table (literally and figuratively) as equals. The edicts issued in the *megillah* by Mordechai and Esther include "giving gifts to [one's] neighbor" and "gifts to the poor,"[164] commandments that are enacted today through donations to food banks, shelters, or directly to people in need as well as gifts of food to friends so that everyone may partake in the feast of *Purim* equally. Additionally, in the traditions that have evolved around *Purim*, normal social hierarchies are overturned.

One such tradition is the Purim *spiel*, a skit that typically uses the framework of the *Esther* story to satirize current events and poke fun at members of the community. The *spiel* is perhaps the most recognizable mode of performance that emerges from within the *Purim* rituals, at least by Eurocentric standards. It is a short, irreverent play with a clear beginning, middle, and end, connected to the community in which (and by whom) it is performed and its current concerns. *Spiels* are all about punching up – the targets of the comedy tend to be public figures or prominent people in that community, such as the rabbi of the synagogue, principal of the school, and the wealthiest/most influential congregants. It is also key that these *spiels* are about laughing with, rather than at, their targets, with some of said figures at times even participating in the performances.

Some Jewish schools take the "*ve'nahafoch hu*," carnivalesque spirit a step further and appoint a "Purim rabbi," a fool figure from among the student population to temporarily take over as principal. In Tel Aviv, starting around the turn of the 20th century, there is a tradition to appoint a *Purim* queen at the "Adloyoda" carnival, with one notable year featuring a *Purim* queen who was a young orphan girl, someone who came from the lowest rung of the social

[163] Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Helene Iswolsky, Indiana University Press, 1965, 10.
[164] Esther 9:22.

hierarchy and was brought to the very top for the day.[165] I propose a parallel between these practices and the election of a king or queen of the feast "for laughter's sake," part of the "comic protocol" of carnival.[166] *Purim* is also the holiday of disguises, of coming as you're not, with even the most revered figures in a community taking a day to dress up as clowns, fools, or characters from the *Esther* story and beyond. The disguising and masking further lends to the carnivalesque collectivity, collapsing individual identities and with them the societal divisions present during the remainder of the year.[167]

Continuing in the spirit of the carnivalesque, I cannot stress enough that *Purim* is inherently collective. The *mitzvot*, the edicts, from *Esther* cannot be fulfilled solo: they require community and collectivity. In addition to feasting and giving gifts of food to neighbors and the needy, the reading *Esther* itself necessitates community. There are lines that are read together in a sort of reverse call-and-response, with the community/audience speaking the line first and then the *chazzan* repeating them. Verses 2:5, 8:15, 8:16, and 10:3 are read aloud by the congregation together, then the *chazzan* repeats them with the melody (not everyone knows how to sing the *trop* for *Esther*, so often the congregation speaks or chants rather than sings the lines). The congregation becomes an active participant in the performance of the story.

Giles and Doan theorize that the same type of performer-audience interaction used to be part of performances of *Rut*; they cast the audience for *Rut* as the chorus, the women of the community in the story who interact with and support the protagonists, who mourn and celebrate with them. Giles and Doan's theory behind this sort of interactive element and its purpose supports my argument for audience interaction in *Esther* working toward the goal of (re)unification and communal feeling in a fractured Diaspora and/or sectarian kingdom:

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[165] Rubenstein, Jeffrey. "Purim, Liminality, and Communitas." *AJS Review*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1992, 253.
[166] Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Helene Iswolsky, Indiana University Press, 1965, 5.
[167] Clark, Katerina and Michael Holquist. *Mikhail Bakhtin*. Harvard University Press, 1984, 302-304.

> This kind of direct presentation is an open form of exchange where the audience accepts the double nature of the presentation…In this way, the audience and character are given entrance into an imagined reality that can powerfully impact the nature of the audience even after the performance is complete…these spaces, with their connection to reality, are where cultural memory is celebrated and where group identity is established, sustained, and transmitted.[168]

Assigning the congregation an active role in the reading of *Esther* already activates them as more than mere spectators: they are part of the re-membering of this story, both amplifying and energizing it through their aural contributions. In turn, time collapses around the community as they are brought together into the visceral experience of the *Esther* story and the intense emotions surrounding its setting and writing.

The specific lines that are spoken by the audience of *Esther* can be organized into two categories: mourning and celebration. The earlier lines are connected to the destruction of the First Temple and Babylonian exile, while the later ones have to do with Esther's elevation of Mordechai in government and the subsequent peace that followed their collaborative reign in Akhashverosh's government. In both, the entire Jewish community (past, present, and future) is impacted by the events or feelings described in those lines: it is communal, national mourning and celebration in which even those not actively engaging are passively participating because of their ethno-religious backgrounds. The destruction and exile impacted all Jews, regardless of status, class, or cultural engagement, in the same way that Haman's proposed genocide would have. Similarly, all Jews then benefitted from Esther and Mordechai's rise in the Persian monarchical structure, even beyond their lifetimes, since the oral mythos surrounding them

[168] Doan, William J. and Terry Giles. "Audience," *The Story of Naomi – The Book of Ruth: From Gender to Politics*. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 29 January 2016, 76-7.

continues with Esther and Akhashverosh's descendants. Esther is said to be the mother or grandmother of Cyrus the Great, the Persian king who allowed Jews to reestablish independent rule in Israel, rebuild the Temple, and return from exile across the First Diaspora. Those who engaged with the earliest known editions of *Esther*, the denizens of Hasmonean Israel, were thus engaging with a sort of origin story for their current conditions, the shared experience of miraculous rescue from extinction and unlikely reversal of fortune that led to their ability to exist as an independent nation again. The destruction and salvation spoken of in these reverse call-and-response lines are moments from cultural memory whose rippling effects are continually being re-experienced by Jews across the centuries: were it not for Esther's actions, there would be no Jews to celebrate *Purim*, or anything else, in the future.

Regarding iconic and dialectic presentation in *Rut*, Giles and Doan expand on the unifying power of audience interaction:

> The *something* and *nothing* offered to us by Naomi's storyteller pulls the listeners into the story. She relies on her knowledge that the spectators are not merely a group of individuals, but a community – a "we" with a shared identity. A relationship between storyteller/actor, the characters of the story, and the audience emerges as a kind of feedback loop that relies on the shared knowledge of the story and its subversive qualities.[169]

Applying this theoretical framework to *Esther*, not only does the *megillah*'s potential as a performance text become further cemented through Giles and Doan's logic, but its application as such does as well. A participating audience becomes a collective, especially one that needs certain cultural/background knowledge in order to fully appreciate the participatory element.

[169] Doan, William J. and Terry Giles. "Audience," *The Story of Naomi – The Book of Ruth: From Gender to Politics*. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 29 January 2016, 75.

Today one can recite the right words along with the rest of the audience for *Esther* (in the 21st century it has become common practice to hand out copies of the text or bring one's own to the readings on *Purim* in order to follow along and participate in the interactive elements), but knowing which lines will be recited in unison and what their significance is requires advance information.[170] Not only do the audience members become part of a collective by speaking the lines in unison, they are also reminded that they are already part of the same collective because they share this cultural knowledge and understanding going into the performance.

The readings of *Esther* in congregation can themselves become quite riotous events, more reminiscent of interactive theatre than the reading of a holy and/or historical book. This is a raucous communal affair, a room full of people dressed in costumes making noise and singing along together at designated points in the telling of the story. The congregation is expected to engage by making noise whenever Haman's name is spoken.[171] Any time the name of Haman is said aloud during the story, it is customary for the congregation to respond by erupting in a cacophony of noise – stomping their feet, shaking and waving noisemakers, pounding on tables, etc. – in order to make literal the traditional curse laid on only the worst of the worst: "יִמַּח שְׁמוֹ/May his name be erased." It is from this practice that various Jewish communities have developed their own methods of symbolically drowning out Haman's name while also being sure to hear it so that they do not miss a moment of the story. Noisemakers, like the ubiquitous *grager* with its loud spinning gears, are commonly used in Ashkenazi[172] communities, whereas in Mizrachi[173] congregations it is traditional to affix Haman's name to one's shoe and stomp it whenever his name is read aloud.

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[170] In a way, it's like going to a midnight showing of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* or other cult classics that come with participatory, communal traditions

[171] The person (sometimes people) reading/singing/chanting the text for the congregation.

[172] Those whose ancestors ended up in what became Eastern, Central, and some of Western Europe in the Diaspora.

[173] Those whose ancestors remained in the Middle East/North Africa in the Diaspora.

In her book *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*, Robin Bernstein investigates how, in America, innocence became something reserved for white children and how that conception was combatted during the Civil Rights Movement. She proposes the term "scriptive things" to describe material objects (including books, toys, and handkerchiefs) in terms of the sort of interaction they invite from people, the structure within which they invite people to play as artists do with a script.[174] I propose that *gragers*, noisemakers, and names stuck onto shoes are akin to scriptive things themselves, offering individuals the opportunity to join in the congregation both present and past to enact the story of *Esther* by taking part in the active fulfillment of the great curse of erasure. No one is required to join in, but these objects and their associated behavior provide a means and, indeed, enticement to join in the collective, embodied engagement with the *megillah*. Congregants can thus connect to it as active cast members in an ongoing story of triumph and survival, the proof of which lies in the ability to gather and riotously re-embody *Esther* together and the power to loudly drown out the name of the man who sought to erase us from the face of the earth.

To ensure that no words are missed from the reading of *Esther*, the *chazzan* will quickly read Haman's name and then pause for the congregation to make noise before resuming the reading when they have quieted down, repeating the process each time his name occurs in the text (a total of 54 times). The reader cannot do the drowning out alone – there must be an interactive audience to bring the curse to life. The public reading of *Esther* is bookended by collective prayer and song as well, which flow into the lyrical story and then out of it into the unbridled festivities.

[174] Bernstein, Robin. "Introduction: Playing Innocent: Childhood, Race, Performance." *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*. NYU Press, 2011, 11-12.

Another part of said festivities once again draws from the many feasts in *Esther*: wine. An entire section of the Talmud in Tractate *Megillah* is devoted to an (unresolved) debate over whether or not one is obliged to get drunk on *Purim*, and if so, how much. The Talmudic scholar Rava argues that one should drink until one can no longer distinguish between the "cursed Haman" and "blessed Mordechai;"[175] in other words, one should get absolutely, uninhibitedly hammered. This idea of unfettered, drunken revelry returns us to the world of the City Dionysia and the festivals of Cybele, the space of embracing the freedom that comes from letting loose, letting go of convention, and letting the wine and the stories flow together in ecstatic communal celebration. *Purim* and *Esther* exist in the liminal world of performance, not entirely detached from time or society but not beholden to their restrictions, either.

In the original, biblical calendar, Adar, the month in which *Purim* is celebrated, is the last month of the year, and is still sometimes doubled in order to keep agrarian holidays at the right times in the lunar calendar. "Thus Adar blinks in and out of existence on the margin of the year"[176] – it is a time of what is, what has been, and what could be all collapsing into one another, indistinguishable and equally embodied in the unfettered, communal revelry lubricated by liquor that resembles the festivals of neighboring cultures such as Athens and Anatolia from which early performance texts emerged.

Esther's Embodied History

In addition to aligning historically and geographically with decidedly theatrical practices, the idea of *Esther* being reinterpreted as a performance text also has cultural support. Reenactment, reliving, and performance are woven into Jewish practice and life. The holiday of *Purim* doubles down on the embodied aspect of Jewish tradition by including a score of

[175] Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Megillah, 7b:7-8.
[176] Rubenstein, Jeffrey. "Purim, Liminality, and Communitas." *AJS Review*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1992, 267.

performance/reliving/embodied elements, including *spiels*, costumes and masks, the interactive readings themselves, and, in some communities, raffles to harken back to the titular lots and/or burning an effigy of Haman.

Returning to Bernstein's scriptive things, these traditions feature a number of opportunities to opt into deeper immersion in the *Esther* story and thereby viscerally experience the ramifications of the story of the survival of the Jewish people (both the legend within the text and the historical context surrounding it) which echo down the generations through such acts of embodiment. These traditions offer an outlet for expressions of communal rage and celebration in their allowance for larger-than-life behaviors, as long as they remain within the confines of shared congregational practices, granting permission to take out bottled up pain on effigies of Haman and satires of contemporaneous political figures semi-hidden in *spiels*. They invite congregants to come together as they are not and, in doing so, reify what they are as a collective bound together by shared, re-membered history, mythos, and ritual. They take the *Esther* story of layered performance for the sake of the people and open it up for individuals to perform as a signifier of the ongoing survival of said people and of those individuals belonging to it.

Beyond *Purim*, there are centuries worth of history of adapting the story *Esther* for the stage in the form of dramas, operas, and other spectacular productions. So many of these adaptations, however, augment and alter the text with dramatic features from contemporaneous theatre without regard for the embodied elements that already surround *Esther* and can be folded into a performance-based reframing. For example, in 2023 an American company called Sight & Sound Theatre staged an adaptation of *Esther*. It advertised this production by highlighting that "it comes to life with magnificent sets, special effects, and live animals"[177] – all of which filled out an enormous proscenium arch stage while the audience watched in the anonymous darkness

[177] "Queen Esther: Live on Stage." Sight & Sound Theatre, https://www.sight-sound.com/shows/esther.

of the house. This sort of staging swaps out immersion for showmanship, turning *Esther* into a Western theatre presentation in which the presence of the audience is secondary to the spectacle.

Handel's adaptation of *Esther* as an oratorio (the 1720 second version of which survives) may well have only ever been semi-staged during the composer's lifetime and thus seemingly presents a scaled-down contrast to the spectacle of the 2023 adaption. The scaling down, however, was not restricted just to the staging, but was applied to the story itself, which was rewritten into a simplified narrative beginning with Esther's elevation to queenship and which subsequently shaves off Esther's first wine feast (in addition to adding a fainting spell to her initial uninvited approach to Akhashverosh in the scepter scene), and then ends with the order for Haman's execution.[178] The oratorio stops before covering the complicated aftereffects of his decree, Esther's continued ascension to fully embracing her royal power, and the line from the celebration of the Jews who were allowed to defend themselves to the ongoing ritual enactments of *Purim*. Not only is Handel's version pulled apart from *Purim*'s performative practices, but it also warps the complex story into one that fits an Aristotelian structure with simplified rising action to a single climax, featuring a heroine whose performance of femininity is at least partially accidental. Handel's *Esther* is divorced from the Jewish people.

Stripping the *Esther* story of its embodied ritual context leaves an interesting narrative, I do not doubt that, but it orphans it from its context and, in doing so, cuts off these performances from their full potential in terms of power to serve the community through challenges and crises. Reframed through the lens of performance, the re-membering rituals of *Purim* strengthen and revitalize the themes of *Esther* in their direct connection to and evolution from the *megillah* and its application as an avenue for release, revival of spirits, and reification of communal identity by

[178] Handel, George Frideric, "Esther, a Sacred Oratorio in Score." Score, 1794, [London, England], University of North Texas Libraries, UNT Digital Library, https://digital.library.unt.edu; crediting UNT Music Library, https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc25948/.

Jewish diasporic communities across time. *Esther* and *Purim* are primed for a performative reading, particularly when properly placed in ritual time and space.

Eicha:

Lamentation through the Ages

There once was an old man who gathered his many sons around him as he lay on his deathbed. He took out a bundle of sticks tied together with twine, and bid each son to try to break the bundle. No matter how they struggled and strained, the bundle would not budge. After the last son handed back the bundle, the old man undid the twine and removed a single stick. With a sharp snap, he broke it in half. Snap, snap, snap, the dying man was able to shatter each stick on its own.[179] So goes Aesop's fable of the Bundle of Sticks, a lesson in the strength of unity. No matter the strain, people are stronger together. Such is the way of Jewish mourning.

Eicha is a complex, culturally haunted poetic text with untapped potential as immersive performance, particularly when paired with the extant embodied practices of its associated holy-day, *Tisha B'Av*, themselves scaffolded on the ritual mourning practices of *shiva*. When combined in this way, I posit that the pairing produces a powerful means through which to activate communal mourning as a tool for healing and hope via immersive, compounding commemorative drama. While *Esther* offers a clearly dramatic story, its narrative and surrounding traditions littered with layered theatrical and quasi-theatrical performances, *Eicha* is quite different. Of the *Megillot* I examine in this project, *Eicha* is the least evidently theatrical. As a result, rather than exploring the performances of individual characters, possibility of a chorus, or musical scoring as I did in the chapter on *Esther*, I focus instead on the elements of *Eicha* that lend themselves to an immersive performance experience. After grounding my analysis in the context of Jewish mourning practices and the complexities of *Tisha B'Av* in the context of Jewish fasts, I break down the poetic devices in *Eicha* and their affective impacts, the

[179] Aesop. "The Bundle of Sticks." *The Æsop for Children*, interactive book. Via the Library of Congress, original publication: 1919.

operation of embodied re-membering through and surrounding the text, the evidence for multiple voices in *Eicha*, the function of the character of Lady Zion, and the way in which communal participation in *Eicha* brings out a message of hope within the grief.

Placing *Eicha* and *Tisha B'Av* in the framework of theatre refashions them for the present, within the community. This is the latent power of this pairing of text and practice. This is the active power of theatre – it is always about the present, collapsing all other temporalities into an implicit answer to the question, "why this work now?" In exploring the performance potentiality of *Eicha*, I aim to urge audiences to think of how this ancient lamentation can serve the current Jewish community as a site for shared mourning and healing. Like its more upbeat fellow *Megillot*, *Eicha* needs to be understood in the present. I explore its ability to transcend and transpose across time, not disregarding the past pains by which it is haunted, but rather using them and their structures of grief to take the community through current crises together. *Eicha* and *Tisha B'Av* operate together to do this through impactful poetic devices, characters whose voices feel familiar, hope hidden between the lines of practice and text, and a globalization of the immersive re-memberings of *shiva*.

On June 21, 2024, the world dropped out from under me. My grandfather, who had stepped in as a father figure and helped raise me, passed away suddenly. Thus, I started the summer in a *shiva* house, doing live research that I wish I had not needed to. The local Jewish community rallied around my family. Friends, neighbors, and people I barely knew brought us lunch and dinner every day. People filled my grandparents' living room thrice daily, without fail, to ensure that my grandmother, my mother, and her siblings could recite the Mourners' *Kaddish*. Between meals and prayers, there was always someone sitting with us, telling stories of my grandfather or listening as we shared our own memories, crying together, laughing through our

tears, offering hugs and tissues and words of comfort both customary and personal. In the surreal haze of grief, immersing in the enactments of *shiva* helped bring life back into focus.

The Talmud traces the practice of sitting *shiva* back to the death of Methuselah, who, according to legend, was mourned for seven days before the flood of Noah fame. Other scholars point to Yoseph[180] mourning for seven days following the death of his father, Yaakov, at the end of *Genesis*.[181][182] Whatever their legendary origins, the details of ritual practices of mourning are laid out in the Talmud and further explained/expanded upon by Maimonides and Rav Yoseph Caro, and the process is divided into further stages that gradually bring the mourners from the most extreme state of grief in the immediate aftermath of the loss to the regular remembrance of the departed on the anniversary of their death.

The word "*shiva*" is derived from the Hebrew word for "seven" and refers to the seven days following a Jewish funeral, during which the closest relatives of the deceased observe ritual mourning and are visited and cared for by the community. The immediate family members of the deceased (parents, spouses, siblings, and/or children) "sit *shiva*," observing mourning through a variety of rituals and behaviors such as sitting on low seats, wearing the clothing item they tore at the funeral (another ritual mourning practice), and refraining as much as possible from physical concerns (such as shaving or bathing). Much of the seven-day initial mourning phase is spent, as the term implies, sitting, while a rotating cast of community members stop by to offer condolences, share stories, and simply listen to the bereaved in whatever ways the latter needs. Starting a conversational track is discouraged: those sitting *shiva* are to be allowed to take the discussion in any direction they see fit or merely sit in supported silence. Each visit ends the same way, with the customary blessing for comfort "הַמָּקוֹם יְנַחֵם אֶתְכֶם בְּתוֹךְ שְׁאָר אֲבֵלֵי צִיּוֹן

[180] Joseph
[181] "Mourning," *Mishnah Torah*, via Sefaria.org.
[182] Genesis 50:10.

וִירוּשָׁלָיִם/May the Lord[183] comfort you among the rest of the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem,"[184] placing the mourners within a long lineage of bereaved who have needed comfort and into the embrace of ancestral and global communal condolence.

Megillat Eicha[185] is a text of and for mourners. Through five chapters of poetic lamentation, including a repeated alphabetic acrostic, the *megillah* describes the destruction of Jerusalem, massacre of the Israelites, and exile of most of the survivors by the Babylonian invaders around 587 BCE. The non-linear tale of woe opens with a cry of the title word, which could translate to "Alas!" or a horrified "How?" A survivor recounts the desolation of the city and suffering of its denizens, interrupted periodically by Lady Zion, the personification of the city of Jerusalem and spokesperson for its people. She mourns her metaphorical children and the cruelty of the triumphant invaders. Another survivor joins in the lament, sharing Lady Zion's pain through comparing the joy and life that once existed in Israel's capital city to the horrors inflicted on and experienced by the Israelite people in the wake of the Babylonian invasion. The mourners talk of the young and old slaughtered in the streets, children starving to death, and the terrifying wrath of God.

Another voice enters the conversation to attempt to offer hope for divine salvation, but eventually the text returns to a dirge, this time phrased in the second person as the speakers address God and describe the ways in which God has guided the hand of destruction. The horrors described escalate to priests soaked in blood wandering the streets and finding no refuge and mothers cooking the corpses of their children in order to survive. Then the tone changes: the speakers warn that the cruelty of the invaders will not go unpunished, that the wheel of justice will turn, meting out their sentence and allowing the people of Israel to return home. The

[183] The name of God used here literally means "The Place"
[184] Translation is my own.
[185] *Lamentations*

megillah ends with a combination of lament and prayer, the speakers continuing to recount their suffering but reframing it as a plea to God to save them after all they have endured.

Situating *Shiva*: Context for the Complexities of Mourning Practices

Eicha, this winding tale of woe, is read annually on *Tisha B'Av*.[186] *Tisha B'Av* represents a global day of mourning for the Jewish people, though the subject of the grief being re-enacted might, for some, feel distant, as Yehuda Steinberg reflects in his book on the *megillah*:

> Mourning is the essence of Tishah b'Av. We are meant to connect with the disaster of the day through reading *Megillas Eichah* [*sic*]. Yet, many people find *Megillas Eichah* long, repetitive, esoteric, and difficult to connect to… How are we to relate to the words of *Eichah*, which describe events from so long ago? If we could only understand more of *Eichah*'s message, we would be able to tap into the significance of Tisha b'Av itself.[187]

As Steinberg notes, though they are still treated with great reverence, the power of *Tisha B'Av*, and *Megillat Eicha* with it, has been dimmed. I posit that an analysis of the pair (holy-day and text) through the lens of performance potentiality can activate the affective power within the text of *Eicha* and communal *Tisha B'Av* rituals and make the "long" lamentation not only easier to connect to, but a helpful tool of hope and healing for times of grief and crisis.

At the end of the week of my grandfather's *shiva*, we partook in the traditional emergence from the *shiva* house, walking around the block, escorted by the community rabbi. That same community and local Jewish communities wherever we went, in various cities and around the world, would continue to support my family as the Jewish stages of grief unfolded, serving as a steadying hand at each step back into the world of the living. This is the goal of

[186] The 9th of [the month of] Av
[187] Steinberg, Yehuda Y. "Preface." *Tears of Hope, Seeds of Redemption: A Deeper Understanding of Megillas Eichah and the Destruction of the Bais HaMikdash*. Menucha Publishers, 1 July 2012, 19.

Jewish mourning rituals, as Simon Heilman explains in his personal exploration of the function Jewish grief practices:

> It includes repeated recollections and new ways of relating to the dead so that what was once a bond with a living person…becomes transformed into a memory. In the process, the grieving ultimately must conclude that even though for them the world is now…diminished significantly by the death of their loved one, they will be able to hold on to its essentials, move beyond mourning and melancholia, and return fully to life.
>
> To move the mourners along this path, …Jewish tradition demands the help of others and a concrete timetable of mourning. However personal the pain of the bereaved and however much the bereaved might want to withdraw into themselves and have their lamentations be private, for Jews it was necessary that their "mourning be publicly known." As a mourner, perhaps more than at any other time, "it is impossible to be a Jew alone."[188]

I agree with Hielman's assessments of the transformative power of the publicness of Jewish mourning practices, the ways in which the involvement of the community paves the way for the bereaved to move their lost loved one into the space of shared memory and gradually reintegrate into the world of the living.

Taking that a step further, I argue that Jewish mourning rituals are intrinsically communal and liminal, a collective body coming together to guide those in pain toward healing, embracing both the mourner and their grief by joining them in feeling through it. The bereaved can wallow, but cannot retreat into themselves nor remain stagnated in grief. The community pulls them from the proverbial Cocytus – no one is allowed to be swept away in the river of lamentation, nor are

[188] Heilman, Simon C., *When a Jew Dies: The Ethnography of a Bereaved Son*. University of California Press, 30 May 2001, 120.

they forbidden from feeling. They are buoyed, rowed along to the other side. Wherever they are located, be it the boonies or the big city, Jewish communities can take on a "small town" feeling of intimacy and enmeshment, especially in moments of great joy or sorrow. Intense emotions are a shared experience, shouldered together. The rituals of mourning (and celebration) serve as scaffolding to support that small town sharing, with funerary and *shiva* practices providing the opportunity for members of the community to extend their hands across the river and keep the bereaved from drowning.

I was, however, in the unique position of having been raised by my grandfather, but not biologically or legally his child. The children, spouse, parents, and/or siblings of the deceased are the center of the Jewish mourning process – the focus is on those who were, at one point, part of their nuclear family. The logic follows: those are the people most likely to feel the loss more intensely, most constantly. It is to their homes that we go to offer support, emotional, spiritual, and physical. They sit on lowered chairs and recite the mourners' prayers, and the community rallies around them, helping them transition back into the world of the living. I have acutely felt the power of these practices both by peripherally benefitting from them and experienced the lack by not being able to fully participate. Mourning outside the lines of Jewish tradition while supporting my mother, aunt, and uncle as they engaged in said traditions, I yearned to be able to join in. I still feel the ache, the untreated wound. Living in that liminal space between child and grandchild through the steps of ritual mourning drove home their power – both seeing their effect and acutely feeling the absence of accessing their full affective impact demonstrated the potency of these practices in real time. *Eicha* with *Tisha B'Av* provides an outlet for the sort of ache for communal mourning rituals that I felt, a space to sit *shiva* for all that the law does not consider. Where the active opting-in I will discuss with *Rut* is not possible, the embodiment of *Eicha*

offers an alternative for affective satiation: understanding *Eicha* as an embodied text would allow space for people in situations such as mine to fully experience the benefits of the Jewish mourning, leaning into the potential provided by *Eicha* within *Tisha B'Av* to provide an outlet for grief that does not fit within the bounds of regular *shiva*. While *Rut* explores the ways in which one can choose to be part of Jewish community through practice and behavior, *Eicha* offers behaviors and practices that galvanize communal support. *Rut* emphasizes the individual opting to be a member of the community; *Eicha* provides a map for the community to come together to support all of its members.

Moving Mourning from Personal to Global

Working as a dramaturg on the development of new Jewish plays, I have seen an influx of "*shiva* plays" beginning in 2020 and increasing in the following years as the global community reckoned with the personal and collective griefs caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The structure of *shiva* offers a framework through which to process the "unprecedented"[189] pain. "*Shiva* plays" are set during the seven-day mourning period, providing playwrights with a contained setting as well as a scaffold for the arc of the play. The plays that have crossed my desk as part of regional, national, and international new play festivals, competitions, and workshops have used the *shiva* setting to grapple with a range of subjects: death of a child, parental estrangement, sibling conflicts, family secrets, identity crises, individual and communal trauma, and more. Each one uses the communal, familial, ritual, and temporal facets of *shiva* to bring the characters to and through the most intensive part of their struggles. Whatever is blocking them from moving forward in the healing process is not necessarily resolved, but it is going to be easier to deal with from here onward because of the shared feeling-through *shiva*

[189] As every email and curtain speech reminded us, those were "unprecedented" times and people were searching for ways to process and cope. *Shiva*'s structure presented a means to meet that need, both for the artists and the audience.

facilitated. These plays are cropping up at a time of compounding crises and devastation impacting global and local Jewish communities, offering the affective power of *shiva* by proxy through theatrical performances.

Though this influx of "*shiva* plays" has been the topic of discussion in virtual and physical rooms of curious dramaturgs, this phenomenon is not entirely surprising. It might, in fact, be seen as just the most recent loop in a cycle dating back to antiquity. I offer that *Eicha* itself could be read as the original "*shiva* play," particularly when it is paired with the practices surrounding its traditional reading on *Tisha B'Av.*

Tisha B'Av is a day on which the Jewish people sit *shiva* together for everyone we have lost over centuries of antisemitic violence and destruction. Initially established as a commemoration of the fall of the First Temple in Jerusalem and the brutal invasion of the Jewish homeland by the Babylonians, the meaning of this day of collective mourning has compounded across generations. It first doubled in mournful meaning with the Roman invasion and destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE following a harsh and drawn-out siege, signalling the end of autonomous indigenous rule in Israel for approximately 2000 years and the start of the Second Diaspora. Since then, diasporic communities have attached to *Tisha B'Av* their tragedies, especially those inflicted on a scale of pain that reverberates across the scattered nation. *Tisha B'Av* marks the day the safety of indigenous rule, the walls of the capital city, and the security of concentrated community were shattered, and all the horrors that followed over the centuries are in some ways seen as the aftershocks of that singularly devastating day. This stacking of sorrow in an effort to understand and collectively recover from them traces back at least as far as the early Rabbinic Period:

> The Rabbis understood Tisha b'Av [*sic*] to be a preordained day of destruction, rooted in the fearful report given by the 10 spies given in the Book of Numbers. The spies' lack of faith led to God's punishment: God refused to allow the entire generation that had left Egypt (with the exception of the 11th and 12th spies, Joshua and Caleb, who gave optimistic reports) to enter the Land of Israel…*Midrash Rabbah* tells that each Tisha b'Av during the 40 years in the desert, 15,000 Israelites died. The Israelites subjected to this decree would actually anticipate this dreadful day by digging their own graves on the 8th of Av and sleeping in them each night from the 9th to the 14th. Should they be among those to die during any of the nights from the 9th through the 14th of Av, their burial would be easier on the survivors because the deceased would already be in their graves.[190]

Whatever the historicity of this desert practice, it reflects the perspective of the authors, writing between the Second Temple Period and the Crusades (in other words, the recovery from the First Diaspora into the Second Diaspora). I find in this apocryphal story an early investment in seeing *Tisha B'Av* as a day of stacking sadness, seeking meaning in grief as well as communal support (including through the collaborative burial practice depicted in the story).

Tisha B'Av became an offering of a set of collaborative tools to grapple with anastrophe. In her reflection on grief from her perspective as a religious community leader, Rabbi Sharon Brous explains tragic loss in literary terms:

> In literature, an anastrophe is a rhetorical mechanism that flips the usual order of a sentence, disturbing the expected flow of the text…Anastrophe, I now believe, can also

[190] Steinberg, Paul. "Tu b'Av: Coming Back to Life." *Celebrating the Jewish Year: The Spring and Summer Holidays*, edited by Janet Greenstein Potter, The Jewish Publication Society, 2009, 208-209.

be a bitter lived reality, when a tragedy upends the natural order, disturbing the expected flow of life.[191]

I view that concept as extremely helpful in exploring and explaining the function of *Tisha B'Av*: the holy-day commemorates communal anastrophes, instances in which the Jewish world was turned upside down. So what do we do? We meet anastrophe with order – the familial and familiar practices of *shiva*, the neat order of *Eicha*'s acrostics – and community coming together.

One of the ritual elements of *Tisha B'Av* is the practice of refraining from greeting one another, a practice shared with *shiva*. While some might argue that this diminishes the sense of community, this is truly an extension of the ethos of *shiva*. It is heightened community, community as a given: rather than creating distance, the deliberate and often difficult act of *not* greeting one another serves as an implication of closeness already in play. When you are already together, you would not greet someone, and when you're going through something difficult together, you are bonded and sharing focus on what matters, not pleasantries.

The Dual Function of Fast Days

Tractate *Taanit*[192] is one of the primary sources of prescribed fasting practices in Judaism, laying out the rules for and reasoning behind different kinds of ritual, public fast days. Fasting in Judaism – though it can feel quite punishing to refrain from eating or drinking for the set number of legal hours – is not about deprivation to punish oneself, but rather to step outside of one's physical self for a larger purpose.[193] There are six canonized public fast days in the Jewish calendar: *Tzom Gedalia*,[194] *Yom Kippur*, *Asarah B'Tevet*,[195] *Taanit Esther*,[196] *Shivah Asar*

[191] Brous, Sharon. "Grieve and Live." *The Amen Effect: Ancient Wisdom to Mend Our Broken Hearts and World*. Penguin Random House LLC, 2024, 89.
[192] "Fast"
[193] "Laws of Fasts," *Mishnah Torah*, 1-3, Sefaria.org.
[194] The Fast of Gedalia
[195] The 10th of [the month of] Tevet
[196] The Fast of Esther

B'Tammuz,[197] and *Tisha B'Av*. Apart from *Yom Kippur* and *Taanit Esther*, the other four fasts are associated with the Babylonian invasion of Israel, destruction of the First Temple, and the exile of much of the Jewish population. They are fasts of mourning, grieving the stages of devastation. *Taanit Esther* and *Yom Kippur* are fasts of focus, with the former serving as an embodied reminder of the three days Queen Esther and the Jewish people spent praying and preparing for Esther to try to save them[198] and the latter as an annual day of repentance and supplication to be set on a good path for the following year. Aside from the six cyclical fasts, Tractate *Taanit* lays out the procedure for declaring a fast day in times of need, most commonly during a drought.[199] Thus there is a precedent for two types of ritual fasting in Judaism: requesting – such as rain or rescue – and mourning. Though *Tisha B'Av* is generally placed in the second category, I would argue that it could fit both. It is a day for mourning what has been lost, both in the Babylonian invasion and in the centuries since, but also a plea for a return, for Never Again, for the final call-and-response line of *Eicha* in congregation.

In practice, *Tisha B'Av* is set apart from the other fasts of mourning in a number of ways. The other annual fasts of mourning are placed in the category of "minor fasts," so designated by their length (dawn to nightfall rather than 25 hours) and the number of leniencies for excusing oneself from their observance. Regarding the latter, Talmudic law adheres to the biblical directive "וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת־חֻקֹּתַי וְאֶת־מִשְׁפָּטַי אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה אֹתָם הָאָדָם וָחַי בָּהֶם"/And you will preserve my dictates and my laws as you will observe them, and live in them."[200] The final phrase of this line is cited as a central tenet of Judaism: Jews must <u>live</u> through these laws, not die for them. There are only three Jewish laws for which Jews are supposed to martyr themselves rather than violate:

[197] The 17th of [the month of] Tammuz
[198] See page *Esther* chapter for more on this communal fast.
[199] Taanit 1, 4.
[200] Leviticus 18:5, translation my own

the prohibitions against murder, sexual violence, and idol worship (the latter of which is very generously defined so that Jews can survive forced conversion, as long as they are only pretending to worship other deities).[201] These two precepts pair together as foundational elements of the Jewish value of life over law, contributing to the tradition of finding legal loopholes or even simply disregarding laws in order to protect an individual's health. Some Jewish legal authorities have even referred to this as stringency in the laws of maintaining and protecting life, rather than leniency in the other areas.

This, understandably, becomes relevant when people with any number of medical conditions are faced with fast days. When it comes to the minor annual fasts, any health condition can excuse a person from fasting entirely. Sometimes this is determined by the individuals' choice, sometimes by means of a religious legal authority actively forbidding them from fasting. When it comes to the "major fasts," the 25-hour[202] fasts of *Yom Kippur* and *Tisha B'Av*, the process becomes more layered and branching due to the importance ascribed to those days. The majority opinion holds that pregnant or nursing individuals, for example, are automatically exempt from all of the minor fasts, but must consult a rabbi for specific dispensation for major fasts. Someone who is sick with a temporary illness that makes fasting difficult is fully exempt from minor fasts, but there are more intricate rules regarding how one should eat on the major fasts. Even the sacred prayer services of *Yom Kippur* are considered less important than fasting, to the point that if a weakened individual must choose between the two, it is deemed better to stay in bed and maintain the fast rather than break the fast and participate in prayers. Placing *Tisha B'Av* in the category of major fasts – with only *Yom Kippur*, the holiest

[201] Sanhedrin, 74a-b.
[202] Similar to Shabbat and holidays, these major fasts are intended to last a full day; an extra hour is added as a buffer at the end in case there was a miscalculation or delay at the start. This originated before there was a set global calendar to consult and months were actively calculated by observation of lunar cycles, then announcements of holy-days spread through signal fires and messengers.

day of the year, as its fellow in that category – implies that the day holds an extremely elevated importance beyond the other annual days of mourning.

Yom Kippur is a highly embodied holy-day, 25 hours devoted to performing penance and reflection, elevated even further into drama with repeated blasts of the *shofar*, the assemblage of the *Kohanim*[203] to bless the congregation (who avert their eyes in reverence), the grand "*Aleinu*" prayer that includes the only instance in which a Jew is supposed to prostrate themself fully to the ground, and deeply body-centered "stage directions" in the repeated litany of apology and awe. If *Tisha B'Av* is *Yom Kippur*'s only companion in the category of "major fasts," then must not *Tisha B'Av*, with *Eicha* at its center, contain that level of heightened, in-the-body performance?

Tisha B'Av does have its associated active rituals, elements that require proactive engagement in addition to the list of activities from which to abstain. For the minor fasts of mourning, the primary difference between those days and any others is the act of fasting itself and short inserts into the daily prayers; on *Tisha B'Av*, there are not only more restrictions, but also more points of communal participation, which more closely resemble fasts of supplication in both the rituals and the act of gathering itself. This includes gathering together for communal readings/chantings of *Eicha* in the evening as the fast begins. *Eicha* is a biblical text, and the readings are traditionally done in dimmed or candle light and followed by collective recitation/singing of liturgical poetry, a category into which *Eicha* also might fit. Both of these types of texts are absent from the practices of minor mourning fasts, once again drawing more of a parallel between *Tisha B'Av* and *Yom Kippur*, during which much of the 25-hour day is devoted to biblical and liturgical engagement.

Positing Potentiality from Poetry

[203] Members of the priestly class/bloodline

I posit that the poetic language of *Eicha* could be read as containing hints toward this dual-purpose fast. As Professor Rabbi Reuven Kimelman notes in his analysis of *Eicha*, the text bears numerous references to the story of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt, the foundational story of salvation to which future redemptions are compared and toward which prayers for rescue refer. These references include the abjad-aided play on words early in the first section of the *megillah*:

גָּלְתָה יְהוּדָה מֵעֹנִי וּמֵרֹב עֲבֹדָה הִיא יָשְׁבָה בַגּוֹיִם לֹא מָצְאָה מָנוֹחַ כָּל רֹדְפֶיהָ הִשִּׂיגוּהָ בֵּין הַמְּצָרִים

Out of affliction, Judah has gone into exile, she settled among the nations and did not find rest, all her pursuers overtook her between the narrow places.[204]

Since vowels are more in the category of punctuation for Hebrew, some words may appear identical without contextual knowledge of their vowels. Since antiquity, texts in Hebrew tend to leave out the vowels, and in biblical texts, there is the further frequency of words written in *ktav khasser*, meaning that vowel-placeholder letters are excluded as well. This opens the door to misunderstanding, but also to possible layers of meaning. In the traditional vowel-less written form, Professor Rabbi Kimelman points out, the word used in the above passage for "narrow places" looks the same as the word for "Egypt," and when it is paired with a conjugation of "ר.ד.פ" (pursue), the phrase evokes the Egyptians' pursuit of the Israelites as they fled to the Reed Sea and its subsequent parting.[205]

Though I share Kimelman's view that these two events in the Israelite story are connected via parallels drawn through the texts, I disagree with his assertion that the comparison is intended to cast light on how the Israelites' cries were answered in the case of the Exodus and unanswered in the case of the destruction; the latter is rather <u>not yet</u> answered. The parting of the Reed Sea is

[204] Eicha 1:3.
[205] Kimelman, Reuven. "Reading Lamentations with Inner-Biblical Exegesis," *TheTorah.com*, 2021. https://thetorah.com/article/reading-lamentations-with-inner-biblical-exegesis

an iconic miracle, a divine intervention that made possible the survival of the Israelites in the face of seemingly certain destruction. Thus it is clear to me that, almost immediately, the core text of *Tisha B'Av* and opening ceremony of the fast day draws a connection to redemption in a moment of despair, arguably the earliest example of this sort of divine salvation after the transition from a large family to true peoplehood. At the end of the book of *Beresheet*,[206] the Children of Israel entered Egypt as a large family; only upon gaining freedom could they truly become a people, an independent nation of Israelites. *Tisha B'Av* commemorates the day that could have shattered this union, the combination of massacres and exile that held the potential to end the Israelites as a distinct people. Instead of being a means through which disparate survivors down the generations close themselves off in personal grief, it is a day centered on community and collective mourning. It is part of an ongoing process of crying together as we continue to re-embody *Eicha*.

Cole S. Aronson supports this connection of griefs down the centuries of Jewish diasporic experience, tying together specifically *Eicha* and the Holocaust through the mode of poetry:

> The stylistic, highly-poetic language of *Eicha* gives voice to this cry of hope:
> Poems are an odd way to express horror and especially moral horror. The destruction in *Eicha* is gruesome; *Eicha* itself is beautiful. This obscene mismatch, of the sense of a poem with the sound of poetry, famously prompted the philosopher Theodore Adorno to declare that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric."[207]

Aronson goes on to argue that the opposite is true: to write poetry after Auschwitz is humanizing, necessary for survival, even a twinge triumphant. It allows survivors to process and communities to mourn while pulling the perpetrators from the level of indescribability associated

[206] *Genesis*
[207] Aronson, Cole S. "After Silence: On Lamentation." *Jewish Review of Books*, 11 August 2024. https://jewishreviewofbooks.com/holocaust/17033/after-silence-on-lamentation/

with divinity down to the viscerally human. I argue that this philosophy can certainly be applied to the foundational tragedy of the Jewish people, and thus to the texts that commemorate it. *Eicha* needs not only to exist, but to be poetic in order to give it power for mourning and hope, memory and building.

Re-Membering

I believe that *Eicha* does not only fit in the category of poetry: to fully engage with the force of the text, it serves to view it as a compounding commemorative drama. It enables the reenacting of mourning for one collective tragedy in order to grieve for all those that followed, for those not canonized, for those too numerous to individually memorialize, for the most recent for which it is difficult to find the right words to work through the blinding pain. So we return to an extant script and engage with it anew. It speaks simultaneously to its original subject and all analogous situations that followed said subject. The glib explanation of Jewish holidays "They tried to kill us. We survived. Now let's eat!" sums up the pattern of Jewish existence, but does not address the tragic part of many iterations of that repeated story: not all Jews survived this regular cycle of persecution. From the Babylonian destruction through today, there are countless losses to be mourned. *Eicha* and *Tisha B'Av* provide both a template and an outlet for that grief, that community-buoyed boat across the river of tears so that we are not drowned in the ever-rising tides. The performed practices of *Tisha B'Av*, including the communal reading of *Eicha*, serve as what Joseph Roach refers to in *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* as a "condensational event"[208] to bring the grief back into the body so that it may be harnessed, performed, and released.

[208] Roach, Joseph. "Introduction: History, Memory, and Performance." *Cities of the Dead*: *Circum-Atlantic Performance*. Columbia University Press, 2022, 28.

To harness it, the grief must first be remembered, which is made possible through the combination of *Tisha B'Av*'s rituals and the text of *Eicha* itself. This re-membering of mourning into the body collapses time, an art that dates back to ancient civilizations. In her analysis of Edmund Spenser's works, Early Modernist Dr. Rebeca Helfer examines the history and impact of mnemonics, beginning with Homer and other ancient epic poetry. She traces what she terms "the art of memory" through the lifetimes of civilizations and how that art has been and continues to be used to portray and process their rises:

> …the art of memory as a poetics that shapes literary theory and practice from antiquity through early modernity…[209]

as well as their falls:

> …readers re-enact the transmission of culture when recollecting Troy's ruins for new times and places…[210]

The art of memory is key to *Eicha*'s power as a means to productively engage with the lingering grief of the initial destruction of ancient Israel and all of the griefs that have echoed down the generations since that time. Re-membering the destruction and devastation of the Babylonian invasion and subsequent tragedies through the visceral, experientially- and linguistically-encoded language of *Eicha* makes the *megillah* both memory as poetics and poetics as memory. As a text and tradition crafted to comfort and carry through a diaspora, *Eicha* contains what Helfer refers to as "mnemonic poetics."[211]

The *megillah* of lamentations connects place and memory through the arresting imagery, layering unspeakable but vital-to-remember grief atop grief. Similar to the *Rabinal Achí*,

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[209] Helfer, Rebeca. "The Art of Poetry and the Art of Memory: Philip Sidney's Mnemonic Poetics." *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme* 45, no. 2, 2022, 108.
[210] Ibid., 112.
[211] Helfer, Rebeca. "The Art of Poetry and the Art of Memory: Philip Sidney's Mnemonic Poetics." *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme* 45, no. 2, 2022, 108.

preserved by Maya descendants through mnemonics in an ongoing act of covert, defiant survivance, *Eicha* contains not only the pain but also the cultural memory, language system, community guide, and story of a people repeatedly forced into hiding to survive waves of invaders and oppressors.

As an early diasporic text, *Eicha* emerged at a time when the question "How do we preserve the past and continue to evolve?" was newly urgent. I see this manifested through the many innovations of the early Rabbinic Period, ultimately including the compilation and official writing of the Oral Torah, regarded as the components of Jewish law that were intended to be transmitted from person to person rather than via text. When faced with the harsh vastness of the Second Diaspora, this oral tradition was put on the page in the form of the Talmud. This sparked controversy – turning oral tradition into written threatens its ability to remain a type of living memory, to both preserve and adapt. *Eicha*'s deployment of mnemonics, through Helfer's concept of "mnemonic poetics" through the depiction of space and through literary mnemonic devices, allows the *megillah* to do what it was feared the Talmud could not: carry the past and adapt to the present.

One of those literary mnemonic devices is a repetition of the Hebrew writing system, which itself was threatened with extinction due to the scattering of the Diasporas and attempts by colonial powers to erase Jewish heritage and cultural identity. The first four of the five chapters[212] of *Eicha* are formatted as alphabetic[213] acrostics, with the third boasting 66 lines in triplicate acrostic. This is not an unfamiliar device in Hebrew liturgical poetry: Psalm 145, also

[212] The actual subdivision of Hebrew Biblical texts into chapters occurred later but has been widely accepted in its usefulness. The acrostic format helps clarify internal divisions of sections more solidly with *Eicha*, so the debatable validity of the later chapter divisions is less relevant.

[213] I am using the word "alphabetic" here as it is traditionally employed to describe this type of poem; however, the Hebrew writing system is technically an abjad, which becomes more relevant in the translation of *Eicha* into an alphabetic writing system.

called "*Ashrei*,"[214] which is recited thrice daily in synagogue services, follows the same structure, though the letter "*nun*" is omitted. According to the ever-popular medieval biblical commentator Rashi, the alphabetic acrostic represents the totality of joys from God and the exclusion of the "*nun*" is due to a prophecy by King David. Crediting the authorship of Psalm 145 to the king, Rashi asserts that David foresaw a metaphysical intertwining of the letter and the downfall of Israel due to "*nun*" starting the word "נָפַל/fell."[215] Could the inclusion of the complete alphabet, "*nun*" and all, in *Eicha* then be the fulfillment of King David's prophecy, with the complete acrostic detailing that dreaded downfall? If so, this has been building for centuries, but also makes this text an allusion to a prayer of praise and promise. Whatever the mystical implication of the inclusion of the "*nun*" in *Eicha*, the longstanding debate over the meaning of one missing letter in Psalm 145 reveals the place and power the alphabetic acrostic device has held in cultural imagination across the centuries.

Subsequent biblical commentators have followed Rashi's lead, responding to the latter's assertions by engaging with the line following where the "*nun*" would be: "סוֹמֵךְ יְהוָה לְכָל־הַנֹּפְלִים וְזוֹקֵף לְכָל־הַכְּפוּפִים/God supports all those who fall and uplifts all those who are bent."[216] Their responses give this section of "*Ashrei*" a doubled emphasis on stability, an extra assurance that the fall of Israel should be impossible with the exclusion of the ill omen of the "*nun*" and the repetition of God's support in the line that takes its place. This invests "*Ashrei*" with the feeling of a text written during good times, with the hope that the fall would never come; *Eicha*, in contrast, can be read as a text written after the fall with the hope of uplifting. Extrapolating meaning when the acrostic is whole from what is inferred by its incompleteness, *Eicha*'s repeated employment of complete alphabetic acrostics not only situates it as the realization of the

[214] Derived from the opening word of the psalm, which is a conjugation of a word for "happy"
[215] Rashi, "Psalm 145," *Psalms*, Sefaria.org.
[216] Psalms 145:14, translation my own.

dreaded destruction, but also as possibly containing within it all of what God can be and do, including salvation. During the years 2023-2025 in which Israeli hostages were being held by Hamas, there was a practice of reframing the traditional daily morning blessing of "בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם מַתִּיר אֲסוּרִים/Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the Universe, who frees the imprisoned"[217] as more of a command than a compliment, an ultimatum to the divine to live up to the titles and acclaim afforded by the populace in prayer. Just as some prayers of praise might be repositioned as demands, so, too, might *Eicha* with its layers of meaning associated with the alphabetic acrostic. The complete acrostic can be read as a demand for the divine to be <u>all</u> the roles that are ascribed to God, including an uplifter, a deliverer.

"*Ashrei*" is far from the only source of comparison of acrostic usage in biblical and liturgical texts. "*Eshet Khayil*,"[218] originally found in *Mishlei*[219] and attributed to King Shlomo, contains a complete acrostic in which the virtues of an ideal wife are espoused;[220] "*Adir Hu*" and "*Ki Lo Na'eh*" are alphabetic acrostics in praise of God sung toward the end of the *Pesach seder*. "*Adir Hu*" builds as it progresses, each section getting longer and including more letters at a time and thus, in its visual and aural expanding, further emphasizes the idea of acrostic as totality. A liturgical song of praise recited at the end of morning services on Shabbat, "*Anim Zemirot*,"[221] contains an alphabetic acrostic within its 31 lines, repeating both ר and ת in doubled lines and an internal repetition of ש. "*Anim Zemirot*" is sung as a call-and-response, and there is a widespread tradition of the "call" being led by children from the community, elevating them to an early taste of community leadership and, following the interpretation of "*Ashrei*," all of the good the world has to offer. The repeated letters are not only the final three in the Hebrew abjad, that also form

[217] "Morning Blessings," *Siddur Ashkenaz*, via Sefaria.org, translation my own.
[218] "Woman of Valor"
[219] *Proverbs*
[220] See the chapter on *Rut*, the *megillah* about the mythical ancestress of King Shlomo who is described as an "*Eshet Khayil*" and fits the description contained in the acrostic song.
[221] Alternatively, "*Shir HaKavod*/Song of Glory"

the word "network," which is, indeed, what is formed by the community responding to these children in song. The lines of Psalm 119 contain an eightfold alphabetic acrostic, totalling 176 poetic lines portraying the speaker's rollercoaster of a journey through praising God, expounding on personal suffering, begging for assistance, and returning to the power of God and God's word.

Judaic studies (and physics) scholar Dr. Aron Pinker synthesizes various similar and pervading interpretations of the alphabetic acrostic device deployed in Jewish biblical and liturgical texts:

> [One school of thought contends] that the main reason for the use of an alphabetic acrostic is to highlight the completeness of expression sought by the author, to convey the idea of totality…This contention has several aspects: All that can be said on any topic, may be implied by an acrostic, or all that is proper to say on a specific topic, can be said by means of words created from the alphabet. In the words of one biblical scholar: "They drew on their stock of divine epithets, lament motives, and other conventional features of religious poetry, which could otherwise be piled on indefinitely." Or, on the contrary, the acrostic alludes to what can be conceived and felt but is essentially ineffable. It cannot be put accurately or entirely into words. Thus, only the letters, the building blocks for the words, are provided.[222]

Applying these two possible interpretations to *Eicha* opens up two distinct but ultimately similar explanations. Perhaps *Eicha* contains the totality of grief, "all that can be said" about it condensed into one text that can be shared by the struggling congregation. Or perhaps *Eicha* engages the acrostic to imply that such grief *cannot* be contained even with all possible words in existence, that it can be evoked only as it is viscerally "conceived and felt." As semantic scholar Dr. Caroline Sauter explains in her analysis of 20th-century translator Gershom Scholem's own

[222] Pinker, Aron. "Nachum 1: Acrostic and Authorship," *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, Vol. 34, 2 November 2006.

struggles with translating *Shir HaShirim* and *Eicha*, "Death cannot, and can *never* [*sic*], be put into words that are *not* [*sic*] figures of speech…love and death and God [are] the ultimate edges and limits of human verbal expression."[223] This indescribability of death supports the use of alphabetic acrostic to either try and fail to encapsulate the unspeakable or the need to engage the entire writing system multiple times in order to get close to a true description. In this way, reframing *Eicha* as performance could help enhance its function to grapple with the indescribable: live performance is not just mimesis but embodiment, a means of engaging with the ineffable.

What can be further gleaned from *Eicha* poetically deploying the entire Hebrew abjad six times over? One could see numeric meaning in the triple repetition of the acrostic that occurs in the third chapter. After all, like theatre, Judaism has its own Rule of Three: the *khazaka*/strengthening. Something repeated three times in a row is elevated in meaning, holiness, seriousness, or even obligation. The opening prayer of *Yom Kippur*, "*Kol Nidre*,"[224] is sung three times, each repetition rising in intensity. Ritual handwashing involves pouring water on each hand thrice. The *kedusha*, the call-and-response prayer recited only in congregation and during which one is not supposed to move or speak beyond the works and stage directions involved in the recitation of the *kedusha*, takes a variety of forms for weekdays and holy-days, but can always be identified by the threefold phrase "*kadosh*, *kadosh*, *kadosh*."[225] Repeating each letter three times in a row thus implies an increase in intensity, the possible powers and implications of the acrostic dialed up to an 11.

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[223] Sauter, Caroline. "Love and Language: The Song of Songs in Scholem and Rosenzweig." *The Song of Songs through the Ages: Essays on the Song's Reception History in Different Times, Contexts, and Genres*. Edited by Annette Schellenberg, Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2024, 403.
[224] Literally "All Our Vows"
[225] "Holy, holy, holy"

The answer to the overall, six-time repetition also appears to also lie in arithmetic, then. A doubling of the tripling. The super-completeness of the literary device might turn the acrostic into a message in and of itself, beyond the reinforcement of the words it carries: there is wholeness to be found, even in the most broken instances. The community comes together and hears the entire abjad three times, then repeated – yes, there has been an indescribable loss, but the true whole is here, in the people coming together to remember.

The sound of the letters themselves hold power as well. For a Jewish individual raised with any amount of ethnic education, the auditory experience of *Eicha* is a journey through a familiar space, even the first time one consciously hears it. It is a neurological path paved by the *aleph bet*, the writing system one is taught from early childhood. In the post-*Eicha* world (i.e. the Diaspora), Hebrew is associated with Jewish communal moments of joy and grief, of existing in Jewish spaces – even if one does not understand what the words mean, the sounds are familiar and connect to these communal moments. The *aleph bet* becomes a compass rose through a moment that might hold fear, uncertainty, crisis. As Sara Ahmed argues: "It is by understanding how we become orientated in moments of disorientation that we might learn what it means to be orientated in the first place."[226] The familiarity of the order within the text, the sequence of sounds repeated in the first four chapters of *Eicha*, signifies belonging to and in the assembled community as well as the global one simultaneously performing the practices of *Tisha B'Av*. Thus the re-membering of this shattering moment in Jewish history also serves to reify the ongoing existence of the Jewish people. Scholars in the field of phonology assert the affective impact of words, the emotional and/or mnemonic power of the aural experience of a specific

[226] Ahmed, Sara. "Introduction: Find Your Way." *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Duke University Press, 2006, 6.

sound: "...some semantic residue echoes in the mere sound of words."[227] This tracks with one school of thought within translation theory in which the phonological experience of a text is key to understanding its meaning, stressing prosody over an isolated literal translation. In its very sounds, *Eicha* becomes a palimpsest:[228] it re-enacts early childhood memories and establishes a tether to communal identity.

The Challenge of Chapter Five

The fifth and final chapter of *Eicha*, however, breaks the pattern of alphabetic acrostic and shifts into shorter verses without a clear poetic framework. Some attribute this to the possibility of multiple authors, claiming the stylistic variation is just the result of another person taking up the proverbial pen.[229] But the stylistic consistency of the majority of this *megillah*, even if it was written by multiple authors, still then begs the question of why the compiler(s) would opt to include a chapter so radically different in formatting, let alone to end the text on such a note. Not only does chapter five abandon the acrostic structure to which the preceding four have steadfastly adhered through shifts in voice and perspective, it also contains much shorter lines than the rest of *Eicha*. There is a stark shift from long poetic phrases to lines arranged in something akin to telegraphic sentences. In chapters one, two, and four, the average verse length is in double digits; chapter five averages out at about six words per verse. This could get choppy, staccato, but never falls into the feeling of stopping and starting. The nature of the *trop* keeps it flowing. The result of the pairing of sentence structure, melody, and contrast with the extended verses of the preceding chapters is the sensation of picking up speed, the heartbeat of the text

[227] Conrad, M., et al. "ERPs reveal an iconic relation between sublexical phonology and affective meaning." *Cognition*, Vol. 226, 2022.
[228] Jay-Rayon, Laurence. "Translating Aural Aesthetics in Contemporary African Narratives: A Case Study." *Research in African Literatures* 44, no. 1, 2013, 166-167.
[229] Greenstein, Edward L. "Voices in Lamentations: Dialogues in Trauma," *TheTorah.com*, 2015, https://www.thetorah.com/article/voices-in-lamentations-dialogues-in-trauma

rising to a fever pitch. This crescendoes, when read in a congregation, with the repeated, communal cry for salvation.

The affective power of these structural choices is supported by the analysis of Dr. Emily Wilson of works emerging from the same region and time period as those to which *Eicha* can be traced, the Homeric poems:

> I began with sound. The vast majority of contemporary English translations of the Homeric poems render the regular meter of the Greek into prose or nonmetrical free verse – using line breaks, but no regular sonic pattern. These translations are written for the page, not the tongue and the ear. Nonmetrical renditions of Homer do not provide the auditory experience of immersion in a long narrative poem, where the immutable pattern of sound is as omnipresent as the waves beating against the shore. I wanted to honor the poem's oral heritage with a regular and audible rhythm, and with language that would, like the original, invite reading out loud, and come to life in the mouth.[230]

Eicha is not meant to be read silently, in isolation. Like the Homeric poems, it is a poem for reciting, singing, experiencing aloud in community. This is what translations should reflect. Texts like these, alive with lyrical affect, can be killed by dense blocks of antiquated language without meter or melody. The fact that this is the case reflects the potential it holds for immersive performance – this should not be regarded as a static, on-the-page text any more than the Homeric poems should, and it, too, is changed and limited by being trapped on the page.

Other stylistic elements in the fifth chapter shore up that assertion. Though the acrostic is abandoned, the chapter is alive with alliteration and struck through with staccato sounds and sentence structure. The short verses punch and pulse with affective power, coming in short bursts of pain that speak in the collective. This is a chapter of coming together, the sound of anguished

[230] Wilson, Emily. "Introduction," *The Iliad* by Homer. W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., NY, 2023, lxii.

individuals aligning in their grief and thus becoming able to utter the final lines of *Eicha* in which the people of Israel, then and now, call out for salvation. The final chapter trades the familiarity of the alphabetic acrostic for the viscerality of grief externalized. In her article on hymnography, Laura Lieber examines the importance of publicness in ancient mourning rituals:

> Grief is not only an inward experience, however; it is also an externalized performance: mourning…Mourning rituals make grief 'manageable' and ultimately constructive not only for the individual but the larger society. Mourning and memorializing channel, contain, and structure otherwise inchoate sensations and emotions; grief rituals and rites integrate one who has experienced a rupture back into the ongoing fabric of community. Physical and material expressions of mourning constitute the seams that recognize and sanction discontinuity even as they generate societal coherence.[231]

Eicha, especially the final chapter, offers both an example of this sort of ancient mourning ritual and an opportunity to revitalize their affective function for modern communities. The speakers of *Eicha* and the contemporary congregation come together to sit *shiva* through the embodied and emotive punch of the final lines of *Eicha*, grounded in the public ritual practices surrounding its reading.

The practice of re-embodying, re-enacting grief was common across the ancient Mediterranean Basin. From dirges to commemorative dramas, poetic re-memberings were popular in the regions neighboring the Second Kingdom of Israel. Even the lamentation of a fallen city is not unique to *Eicha*: evidence for such lyrical, dramatic mourning texts exist in Akkadian, Sumerian, and Greek.[232] The recurrence of similar phrases across these types of texts

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[231] Lieber, Laura S. "Stages of Grief: Enacting Lamentation in Late Ancient Hymnography." *AJS Review* 40, no. 1, 2016, 101–102.

[232] Alexiou, Margaret. "Forward." *The Fall of Cities in the Mediterranean: Commemoration in Literature, Folk-Song, and Liturgy*, edited by Mary R. Bachvarova, Dorota Dutsch, and Ann Suter. Cambridge University Press, 2016, x-xi.

further support *Eicha*'s place in the tradition of re-presentations of communal mourning, as does its use of the woman's wailing voice to carry the cries of the commons back into cathartic public consciousness.[233]

Within the context of contemporaneous societies and their performances of grief, I offer that *Eicha* might be understood as threnody, a mournful poetic style emerging from the Greek word "*threnodia*," "wailing." This wailing comes from ancient Israel's neighbor on the Mediterranean with which it engaged in cultural exchange. The mythological source of threnody is Linus of Thrace, the personification of lamentation/dirge/threnody who is variously a child of Calliope, Muse of Epic Poetry, and Apollo, God of Song; or of Urania, Muse of Astronomy, Mythology, and Astrology, and either Apollo or Poseidon, the Earth Shaker.[234] These possible parentages provide a window into perceptions of the place occupied by Linus and his domain in the eyes of his creators: he is a son of storytellers and performers with abilities that are literally and figuratively earth-shaking. Calliope and Urania's domains are tied to arts that use the past to guide the future. Either paternal option is an Olympian, at the very top of the immortal hierarchy and with the strength to show for it. And show they do – both Apollo and Poseidon are rather front-facing gods, with Apollo taking over the domain of the sun from the Titan Helios and Poseiden repeatedly placing himself at the center of divine and mortal conflicts, fighting with or against his brother Zeus, King of the Gods. Apollo's appearance on both possible family trees is further fitting due to his dominion over music as well as health and prophecy. Song, healing, and a look forward toward the future all feature in *Eicha* – a threnody with a hint of hope.

Who Speaks for the People?

[233] Alexiou, Margaret. "Forward." *The Fall of Cities in the Mediterranean: Commemoration in Literature, Folk-Song, and Liturgy*, edited by Mary R. Bachvarova, Dorota Dutsch, and Ann Suter. Cambridge University Press, 2016, xi-xii.
[234] "Linus." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Linus-Greek-mythology

There is an ongoing debate over how many voices are speaking in the possible threnody of *Eicha* and who they are. The only character named in-text is Lady Zion, who personifies Israel's capital city of Jerusalem and, perhaps, the entire land and/or nation. The other speaker(s) address her directly and speak about her, while she repeatedly asserts herself and her perspective in the text. Her lines frequently begin in the middle of the other speaker's/s' acrostic lines, which could imply interruptions, attempts to get their attention, arguments, or simply conversation. Interruption like this helps give the text its dialogic tone, in contrast to other biblical texts in which speech act verbs, such as "and he said," introduce lines of spoken dialogue within the narrative. This back-and-forth, combined with the deep pathos of the lines, suggests Lady Zion speaking for herself within the narrative of the text rather than merely being quoted or described by another speaker or an overall narrator.

This is further supported by the way in which other dirges were performed within biblical texts:

> Scholars of biblical dirges have already pointed out that they were chanted at times in antiphonic style, by several performers, one chanting and the other responding.[235]

A form of call-and-response is present in congregational readings of *Eicha*, which tracks with the intra-biblical performance of dirges as well as the common communal call-and-response performance of alphabetic acrostic liturgical poetry. Further, the move from call-and-response to dialogic is not a leap – it is a path paved for a performance driven by back-and-forth.

One long-standing argument is that the primary narrator of *Eicha* is the prophet Yirmiyahu,[236] and thus all of the lines not explicitly attributed to Lady Zion are his (or perhaps including those, and he is interrupting himself to interject quotes, but his is still the only voice

[235] Bar-Ilan, Meir. "The Keening Women." *Some Jewish Women in Antiquity*, Brown Judaic Studies, 2020, 16.
[236] Jeremiah

speaking). This interpretation has been disputed at least since the 12th century, first by the biblical commentator Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra, who asserts that the contents of *Eicha* are inconsistent with the scroll discussed in Yirmiyahu's eponymous book (the scroll to which those arguing for Yirmiyahu's authorships attach *Eicha*). I agree that Ibn Ezra's assessment is supported within the text, that the Yirmiyahu argument does not align with the text itself, as is demonstrated in the analysis of Professor Edward L. Greenstein:

> Like many other biblical texts, the Scroll of Lamentations (Megillat Eikhah) does not identify who is speaking. A voice is heard, and the reader/hearer must reckon or imagine who the speaker is likely to be. Although tradition has attributed the voice to the prophet Jeremiah, who witnessed the siege and destruction of Jerusalem and its temple by the Babylonians, it is evident to any reader/hearer that there are several different voices to be discerned in the Scroll. These voices interact, producing a drama, or rather a series of dramas, from within the dialogues of which the text is composed.[237]

I concur that the voice in the text seems to shift, interact, and impact one another, indicating different speakers in the stylistic and tonal variation as well as the slightly different perspectives, at times, on events. Additionally, a character referred to only as "The Man" introduces himself at the start of the third chapter, which suggests that he has not been speaking until that point and thus cannot be the same speaker as the one(s) in the first two chapters. This implies the existence of multiple characters within *Eicha*; even if there is only one performer embodying multiple voices, this opens the door for performance by a cast in dialogic form.

Professor Greenstein proposes multiple voices in *Eicha*, with four distinct speakers in chapter three and the final chapter spoken by a communal voice, drawing parallels to other

[237] Greenstein, Edward L. "Voices in Lamentations: Dialogues in Trauma," *TheTorah.com*, 2015, https://www.thetorah.com/article/voices-in-lamentations-dialogues-in-trauma

biblical figures to establish the archetypes into which each voice falls.[238] He affirms that "The Man" who introduces himself is a different voice than the ones speaking in chapters one and two, citing Kim Lan Nguyen's offerings of Yirmiyahu and King Tzikiyahu as possibilities, before suggesting an alternative:

> The use of the particular term גבר, however, does not point to the sufferer's gender, but is a literary type. In Mesopotamian literature concerning the complaining sufferer and in biblical literature of this type, such as Psalm 88:5 (and compare Ps. 94:12) and Job 3:3 and 23, the complainant refers to himself as a "man" (*gever* in Hebrew, *etlu* in Akkadian).
>
> Accordingly, the "man" of Lamentations 3:3 is not a male but a sufferer. The syntax of the verse supports this reading, for the speaker does not say, "I am the man—that I have seen affliction (אני הגבר ראיתי עני)" but rather "I am the man—that *he* has seen affliction (אני הגבר ראה עני)." The speaker identifies himself as a literary type.[239]

I see in Greenstein's proposal the evocation the concept of archetypal characters which appears across times and space, popping up in various recorded and acknowledged performance traditions, with versions of certain specific archetypes recurring as well, such as the young lovers (to be explored in *Shir HaShirim*), the mournful mother, and the man who has lost everything. Greenstein compares the latter with Iyov,[240] drawing a line between The Man in *Eicha* and the titular character in a biblical text that is among those most overtly written to be easily accessible to a contemporaneous audience (as evidenced by its language, both word choice and linguistic style).

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[238] Greenstein, Edward L. "Voices in Lamentations: Dialogues in Trauma," *TheTorah.com*, 2015, https://www.thetorah.com/article/voices-in-lamentations-dialogues-in-trauma

[239] Greenstein, Edward L. "Voices in Lamentations: Dialogues in Trauma," *TheTorah.com*, 2015, https://www.thetorah.com/article/voices-in-lamentations-dialogues-in-trauma.

[240] Job

Building off of Greenstein, I argue that The Man who has lost everything is not the only archetypal character who appears in *Eicha*. Lady Zion can be categorized as the mournful mother who has played a role in crises across recorded history. Women often have been made into carriers of memory – by choice, by necessity, or by some combination thereof. This appears to particularly come hand-in-hand with familial or communal tragedy and persecution. The female body literally carries the future of an ethnic group; this task is paired with carrying culture and history.

The body of the female Other has a long history as the site of survivance and historiography. Indigenous women under colonizing power, enslaved women, female survivors of war, female survivors of genocide, and more have repeatedly been assigned the labor of carrying their people. This pattern has been repeated so often that it has been reflected in storytelling across time. Euripides's titular Trojan woman,[241] Suzan-Lori Parks's Lucy the carrier of confidences,[242] Dreamworks's imagining of Yokheved's lullaby to Moshe[243] – divided by space, time, and style, all of these imagined women repeat the re-membering of threatened collective identities through their own bodies. Even the Greek goddess and manifestation of memory incarnate is a woman, Mnemosyne, presiding over both memories that inspire and those so painful that the dead seek to forget. Always, Mnemosyne remembers.

Judaism evolved into a matrilineal ethno-religion out of necessity, responding to the other side of this pattern: the violence directed deliberately at the bodies of Othered women. Matrilineality is not mentioned in the Torah; rather, it was established so that survivors of sexual violence would not be subjected to the secondary trauma of any resultant children not being granted membership to their mothers' people. That complicated concept carries over in *Eicha*,

[241] Euripides. *Trojan Women of Euripides*, translated by Gilbert Murray, Oxford University Press, 1915.
[242] In *The America Play*
[243] In *The Prince of Egypt*

with the only definitively female voice in the text reviewing what had been and what has happened, the positive past and the destruction wrought, all felt through her metaphorical body in the form of the city of Jerusalem and the children she bore within it.

Figuring the "Mother"

The personification of Zion/Israel or Jerusalem as a woman is not unique to *Eicha*. The feminized country becomes a stand-in for both the people and its mother, mourning or celebrating for them in later biblical texts. The book of *Yishaya*[244] includes an instance of God/Jerusalem-as-Mother in its final chapter, offering a protective promise of a bright future at the end of text wrought with warnings and ruin: "כְּאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר אִמּוֹ תְּנַחֲמֶנּוּ כֵּן אָנֹכִי אֲנַחֲמְכֶם וּבִירוּשָׁלִַם תְּנֻחָמוּ/Like a man whose mother comforts him, so shall I comfort you, and in Jerusalem you shall find comfort."[245] This figuring of Mother Jerusalem features in rabbinic liturgy as well, which, like *Eicha*, emerged from moments of instability and dangerous uncertainty for the Jewish people. This stylization of Israel as a maternal figure stands out in the female-body-as-nation throughline of the *Megillot*. In *Shir HaShirim*, *Esther*, and *Rut*, the female body in question more closely resembles the archetype of the Maiden, the young woman at the start of her life in society who uses her beauty, charm, and cleverness to drive her story in a direction closer to the arc of a classical comedy, building toward the future and ending in a resolution that focuses on futurity. In the case of *Eicha*, the narrative remains unresolved and thus needs the protective, caring intervention of the Mother rather than the wily solutions of the Maiden.

There is a tradition in Jewish thought surrounding the power of a mother's tears, in particular, a recurring motif of the weeping mother as a catalyst for salvation, both personal and

[244] *Isaiah*
[245] Isaiah 66:13, translation my own.

collective. In the prophet Yirmiyahu's account of the Babylonian exile in his eponymous book, the Matriarch Rachel turns the tide from tragedy to the road to redemption:

> כֹּה ו אָמַר יְהוָה קוֹל בְּרָמָה נִשְׁמָע נְהִי בְּכִי תַמְרוּרִים רָחֵל מְבַכָּה עַל־בָּנֶיהָ מֵאֲנָה לְהִנָּחֵם עַל־בָּנֶיהָ כִּי אֵינֶנּוּ/So said God, "A voice is heard in Ramah, wailing, crying bitterly – Rachel, crying over her children, refusing to be comforted over her children, for they are gone."
>
> כֹּה ו אָמַר יְהוָה מִנְעִי קוֹלֵךְ מִבֶּכִי וְעֵינַיִךְ מִדְּמָעָה כִּי־יֵשׁ שָׂכָר לִפְעֻלָּתֵךְ נְאֻם־יְהוָה וְשָׁבוּ מֵאֶרֶץ אוֹיֵב/So said God, "Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from crying, for there is recompense for your efforts, by God, and they will return from the land of the enemy."
>
> וְיֵשׁ־תִּקְוָה לְאַחֲרִיתֵךְ נְאֻם־יְהוָה וְשָׁבוּ בָנִים לִגְבוּלָם/And there is hope for the end, by God, and your children will return to their borders."[246]

These verses are quoted and paraphrased in song, sung through the generations in commemoration of the miraculous intercession of a mother's cry from beyond the grave, producing a promise from God and saving her children from oblivion.

Another mother, Hannah, is credited with the creation of the type of personal prayer that ultimately was adapted and adopted more broadly during the Rabbinic Period in order to preserve Jewish communal ritual practice. This legendary original prayer begins as a personal cry and results in communal change. Her tearful plea is for a child after years of bitter barrenness: "וְהִיא מָרַת נָפֶשׁ וַתִּתְפַּלֵּל עַל־יְהוָה וּבָכֹה תִבְכֶּה"/And she was embittered in her soul, and she prayed unto God and cried."[247] In fact, this passage marks the first occurrence of the root word for "prayer" in the Hebrew Bible, read chronologically. The immediate result is the conception of Hannah's longed-for child, who is promised to the service of God and ultimately becomes the prophet Shmuel.[248] As a leader, Shmuel is instrumental in unifying the tribes of Israel into the

[246] Jeremiah 31:15-17, translation my own.
[247] Samuel I 1:10, translation my own.
[248] Samuel

First Kingdom under King Shaul[249] and then King David, ushering in an era of stability after a series of crises during the preceding fractious period of the Judges.

Even the Hebrew word for "mercy" comes from the root of "womb" – "רחמים" from the root ".ר.ח.מ" With all of this contextual weight, the cries of Lady Zion over her children point toward the ultimate hopeful turn within the darkness of the text. Layered with the seeds of hope sown throughout the *megillah* and the healing steps of communal mourning, the mother archetype stepping in suggests a similar turn to mercy, an answer like that given to other legendary mothers' cries. This time, the narrative ends with the plea rather than the answer, but there is a different power to that, a permission to feel through the pain as well as the passing of the torch of action to the community. The path is paved for them with the cries; now we join in and then build for the future, which is perhaps especially notable in the proximity of *Tu B'Av*, a holiday centered on futurity and a celebration of life/youth/love as well as the possible parable within *Shir HaShirim* to the renewed relationship with God.

Women's cries were not seen only as symbols of hope, however: there is also a historical and biblical association between women and mourning practices. Yirmiyahu, eternally entwined with tragedy and mourning, calls for the "keening women" to memorialize the fallen King Yoshiyah:[250]

> …Jeremiah's words tell of women who acted independently of men and whose function was to keen on occasions of national mourning; they would probably serve as professional mourners at private funerals as well. These women achieved such proficiency that their services were required on occasions of state. The keening women transmitted their dirges to their daughters…and women would mourn together "each

[249] Saul
[250] Josiah

> woman with her companions". The purpose of keening was to intensify the sorrow, to induce a renewed flow of tears. That this art was perfected by women is evident from Jeremiah's dependence on the wailing of women, rather than of men.[251]

Singing laments was, it seems, "women's work" in the ancient Israelite perception, a division of labor that was shared across other ancient Mediterranean societies, as Susan Ackerman explains in her exploration of the role of women in ancient Israelite religious practice:

> Women's work in mourning, moreover, characteristically involved the singing of lamentations, and Mesopotamian tradition has in fact preserved the texts of several dirges sung as part of Tammuz mourning rituals. These include a large corpus of liturgical laments from the first millennium BCE.[252]

The performance of lamentation has not ceased, and the "corpus of liturgical laments" has continued to expand as more time and tragedies have passed.

Collective Cries

This ties back to *Tisha B'Av* and the communal reading of *Eicha*, which is traditionally followed by the singing/reciting of *kinnot* – a word whose aural similarity to "keening" is not incidental. *Kinnot* are poems of lamentation that, unlike much of Jewish liturgy, have no temporal boundary – they can and have been authored across time, and new *kinnot* have been added to the oeuvre of Jewish expressions of grief in response to new tragedies. As of 2026, there continues to be discussion and debate over new *kinnot* to be included in the aftermath of the October 7th massacres, a process adjudicated not by a specific assembly of authorities, but by the global community testing the options and searching for ones that appropriately express the

[251] Bar-Ilan, Meir. "The Keening Women." In *Some Jewish Women in Antiquity*, 52–77. Brown Judaic Studies, 2020, 54.
[252] Ackerman, Susan. "'This Is the King's Sanctuary and a Temple of the Kingdom': Women and Ancient Israel's State Temples, I." *Women and the Religion of Ancient Israel*. Yale University Press, 2022, 139.

pain that has been and is being experienced, the words that capture the cathartic power of keening.

In *The Amen Effect*, whose title itself references a call-and-response that only occurs when more than one person is present for a Jewish blessing, Rabbi Sharon Brous expounds on the power of collective mourning in Jewish tradition. She cites two stories that are set in the near-aftermath of the destruction of the Second Temple with inverse but complementary morals. The first describes the struggle of survivors of the destruction to go on living after experiencing loss on such a grand scale, and who were subsequently drawn to an ascetic lifestyle. This culminated in one rabbi asserting that Jews should no longer marry. This asceticism and rejection of the future was disputed by both spiritual leaders and laypeople through the argument that this attitude is anathema to Jewish ideology: the Jewish way is to "grieve and live."[253] Conversely, the second story involves a Jewish wedding a couple of generations into the Second Diaspora, at which the groom's father is so overwhelmed by the cognitive dissonance of the grief that lingered from the destruction and the celebrations going on around him that he smashes a glass. This story provides one possible source for the tradition of breaking a glass at Jewish weddings, infusing the practice with a return to the idea of needing to hold both pain and joy together, to "live and grieve."[254] Brous argues that these two concepts are made possible through the collaborative effort of Jewish communities so that no one is left to carry this double burden alone,

> [disconnected] from the web of humanity that lives and dies, loves and loses, suffers and sometimes finds solace…we are like the aspen trees that dot the landscape of the

[253] Brous, Sharon. "Grieve and Live." *The Amen Effect: Ancient Wisdom to Mend Our Broken Hearts and World*. Penguin Random House LLC, 2024, 91-93.
[254] Brous, Sharon. "Grieve and Live." *The Amen Effect: Ancient Wisdom to Mend Our Broken Hearts and World*. Penguin Random House LLC, 2024, 93.

> Rockies. Each tree is part of one giant living organism…connected through a system of underground roots…when one tree falls, the whole colony feels the reverberations, even hundreds of miles away. And, miraculously, the root system compensates for the loss of one tree by birthing another.[255]

This does not imply that the dead are replaced and forgotten; rather, the interconnectedness of the global community ensures that loss does not leave a hole in the lives of the survivors, a chasm into which they can fall. Coming together in mourning, communities can ensure that both life and grief can carry forward together in a way that is healthy and hopeful.

In Jewish biblical texts, there is a concept of *kri*[256] versus *ktiv*:[257] instances in which there is an oral tradition that provides a minor but meaningful modification of a written word. This phenomenon appears at the end of *Eicha*, in verse 21: "הֲשִׁיבֵנוּ יְהוָה ו אֵלֶיךָ (ונשוב) [וְנָשׁוּבָה] חַדֵּשׁ יָמֵינוּ כְּקֶדֶם/Bring us back, O God, to You, and we shall return – renew our days so we may be as we were!"[258] The parenthetical contains the word written in the scroll, while the brackets contain the word that is read aloud, creating a subtle but noticeable difference between the written and read versions. The more dramatic contrast is between where this line occurs in the written versus the read. In its written state, *Eicha* ends on verse 22: "כִּי אִם־מָאַס מְאַסְתָּנוּ קָצַפְתָּ עָלֵינוּ עַד־מְאֹד/For You rejected us, in wrath raged against us."[259] When it is read aloud on *Tisha B'Av*, *Eicha* ends on a communal repetition of verse 21. The final line, as written, is about God turning away and raging in bitterness; but the final line, when read aloud, is a communal cry for a redemption, return, and a brighter future. This repetition is all *kri*; you would not know of it simply by looking at the text, unless someone has annotated that particular printing with the traditional interaction (which

[255] Brous, Sharon. "Grieve and Live." *The Amen Effect: Ancient Wisdom to Mend Our Broken Hearts and World*. Penguin Random House LLC, 2024, 102.
[256] "[what is] read"
[257] "[what is] written"
[258] Eicha 5:21, translation my own.
[259] Eicha 5:22, translation my own.

would not be the case in any version of the scrolls, which are what the *baal koreh*[260]/reader would be using to chant the text to a congregation, since those can only contain the text in its basic, unadulterated form, without vowels or any other additions). When the text is stagnant, read as a document, it is as its English title implies: lamentations. But when it is taken up by a community, it becomes a prayer, a call to action. That invocation is a sort of plea asking God to bring order back to our lives. Here we have the dark carnival: the ruling order is taken away, but this twist on the carnivalesque has terrible and terrifying, abyssal quality to it, and so ends with the desire for all of the social rules to come back and to have meaning again.

This community-catalyzed hopeful turn ties back to *Tisha B'Av* as a collective *shiva*: memorializing and remembering are key, but ultimately the communal involvement in doing so paves the way for a return to the world of the living. Neither *Tisha B'Av* nor *shiva* is about wallowing; rather, they are a means of bridging pain and perseverance, carrying the past in our individual and collective bodies as we build a better future with those same bodies. *Shiva* also has ties to cycles, down to the tradition of feeding the mourners circular food to represent the cycles of life and death. *Eicha* and *Tisha B'Av*, too, are very much entrenched in cycles, which are also points of hope. Professor Elie Holzer spoke with me about *Eicha*'s intriguing usage of two different words for hope. The first, "תִּקְוָה" is the word that has made the leap into modern conversational Hebrew, and in both modern and biblical contexts can be translated as a type of concrete hope for something specific that can be seen on the metaphorical horizon. This is the easier hope, the hope for what is likely. Chapter three features a different word for hope, conjugated two different ways but holding the same meaning: "אוֹחִיל/ תּוֹחַלְתִּי."[261] Holzer explained that this word describes specifically a hope that exists in despair – the hope-er is not in

[260] Literally "master of reading"
[261] The two quoted words are conjugations of the same root, the first meaning "I will hope" and the second "my hope."

denial, but sees and feels the pain and reality of what is happening and maintains an inner faith, a way of imagining that things will be better. In *Eicha*, Holzer views this as relating to a connection to God that allows for that hope, as well as something that returns/answers our hearts, citing as support the declaration of faith in that same verse and the possibility that it references the previous verse, which enables that specific kind of hope. This different form of hope, simultaneously unfounded and stubbornly rooted, enables the turn that happens in the third chapter: the dialogue shifts from talking about and viscerally experiencing despair, to the more hopeful lines, not in denial about anything, not pretending all is well, but able to hold the tragedy and the hope together. Holzer further believes that witnessing someone perform that range of feeling, that shift, with this specific kind of hope, can have a deeply powerful affective impact.

Within the text, this hope is made possible through the dialogic exchange between The Man who has lost everything and the archetypal friend supporting him through the worst of times. Translating that from text to context, the hope lies in the power of embodied, communal mourning, the productive catharsis of the large-scale *shiva* and immersive *Eicha* experience. The importance of this ancient ritual can be better appreciated through the application of contemporary understandings of trauma requiring collective and active processing.[262] *Eicha* and *Tisha B'Av* require one to work through grief. The embodied mourning practices of *Tisha B'Av* pair with the highly visceral language of *Eicha* to take participants on a cathartic journey utilizing mental imagery and quasi-perceptual conscious experience, an employment of what philosopher Nigel Thomas describes as a need for a multisensory experience:[263]

[262] Schick, Kate. "Acting out and Working through: Trauma and (in)Security." *Review of International Studies* 37, no. 4, 2011, 1838.
[263] Thomas, Nigel J.T. "Mental Imagery." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2018 Edition)*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, 2018, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/mental-imagery/.

> [One] way in which the expression 'mental imagery' (together with many of its colloquial near-equivalents) may be misleading, is that it tends to suggest only quasi-*visual* phenomena. Despite the fact that most scholarly discussions of imagery, in the past and today, do indeed focus mainly or exclusively upon the visual mode, in fact, quasi-perceptual experience in other sensory modes is just as real, and, very likely, just as common and just as psychologically important.[264]

Eicha contains haunting scenes: mothers forced to cook and eat their dead children, the dry lips of infants reaching out to nurse but finding nothing, young men crushed under millstones, elders cut down in the streets. The sounds of *Eicha*, echoed in the *trop*, paint an aural picture of despair and desolation: the wailing of women, the cries of the starving, the jeers of triumphant invaders celebrating the destruction they have wrought. The viscerality of the imagery in the text is driven home by the embodied experience of observing *Tisha B'Av*: the current generations join those of the past in their pain and grief through the engagement of *shiva* practices.

I suggest that *Tisha B'Av* practices could be examined as a sort of dark flipping of the carnivalesque, a mourners' version of the joyful levelling of social hierarchies. Just as all members of society come to the table together for feasts at festivals that fall into the category of the carnivalesque, those engaging in the *Tisha B'Av* rituals sit on the floor or low chairs, as is customary for mourners during *shiva*. No one is above anyone else, literally, nor does anyone have greater access to food and drink since all are fasting. Other signifiers of status are stripped away (rather than being handed out to some from lower rungs of the socio-economic ladder, like the temporary privileges granted in carnivalesque festivals): freshly-washed clothes, cosmetics (including perfumes, body and hair oils, soaps, and creams), and leather shoes, all of which have

[264] Thomas, Nigel J.T. "Mental Imagery." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2018 Edition)*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, 2018, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/mental-imagery/.

historically been costly in addition to affording comfort, are forbidden for the duration of the 25 hours. The prohibition on greetings clears away another social divider in some societies across history and space. There can be no formal conjugation of "hello," no hierarchy of who must be greeted first, no titles of deference offered in greeting, and so social interactions are not built on the foundation of hierarchical divisions. If one wishes to speak with anyone on *Tisha B'Av*, one must engage on a more equal, human level.

Eicha and *Tisha B'Av* bundle the Jewish community together, providing strength through sharing what might otherwise break each individual. In her investigation of the performance of sympathy and possibility of reconciliation made visible in acts of publicly performed grief in the territories now known as Canada, Jill Carter considers the significance of articulated memory. She proposes that the opportunity to remember and articulate moments of meaning in the midst of colonization's disordered assault is a vital, life-affirming act that connects the fallen ancestor, the current survivor, and the future descendant in a ceremony of mourning and a celebration of Indigenous endurance.[265] As Carter asserts, this is true not just for acts of resistance, but for shared pain and communal healing in response. Public mourning is a human right and necessary for health – being able to name one's grief and undergo the journey of mourning together is vital to the healing process. *Eicha* and *Tisha B'Av* together are a public performance of indigenous grief, formed first in response to colonial violence. Viewed through the activating lens of performance, when the practices of *Tisha B'Av* are paired with the complex text of *Eicha* as it is engaged in communal readings, the result is a whole greater than the sum of its parts. Each taken on its own could be a sort of depressant, in essence: fasting, refraining from greetings or bathing, low seating, and the words of lamentation. When combined through a shared embodiment, they

[265] Carter, Jill. "Discarding Sympathy, Disrupting Catharsis: The Mortification of Indigenous Flesh as Survivance-Intervention." *Theatre Journal* 67, no. 3, 2015, 419.

can turn from shattering sticks of solitary grief into a strengthening performance of hope through shared hardships.

***Shir HaShirim*:**

Epic Love

Shir HaShirim, The Song of Songs,[266] is the most scandalous of the *Megillot*. It contains a poetic exploration of the intense relationship between two young lovers, the Raaya[267] and the Dod,[268] as they struggle with and exult in their mutual desire. The Raaya shares her feelings with a group of other young women who question and encourage her love, the deeply pastoral setting explodes into rich descriptions of the court of King Shlomo then returns to the humble gardens and vineyards of the young lovers, the Dod is turned away at the Raaya's door only for her to chase after him (apparently twice) from her rural home into the city, and all throughout the two extoll each other's physical virtues and lyrically long to join their bodies in lust and love. As a result of this sexually charged and often explicit text, *Shir HaShirim*'s meaning has been debated across centuries and nearly did not make it into the biblical canon.

Though the scandalous, sensual *Shir HaShirim* does have a history of theatrical interpretation through the "drama theory," that framework discounts crucial contexts and discards all of the powerful embodied practices in the orbit of *Shir HaShirim*. I propose instead that there is a great deal of power in the combination of *Shir HaShirim* with the practices of *Pesach* (the holiday on which it is read) as well as the semi-lost festival of *Tu B'Av*, for which I further position a fully embodied *Shir HaShirim* as a possible palimpsest. This mix can be viewed as a road map — or choreography — for united Jewish peoplehood in indigenous land; healing from traumas of diaspora; and building a communal sense of identity based on liberation, equality, energy, and love no matter where said community is located. This potent triple threat

[266] Or "Poem of Poems" – the word for "poem" and "song" is the same in both ancient and modern Hebrew.
[267] The characters in *Shir HaShirim* are never named, so I refer to them by the primary terms of endearment or descriptors by which they address each other. "Raaya" can be translated to "darling" or "dearest."
[268] "Dod" can be translated as "beloved" (it can also be translated as "uncle," but that fits far less in this context).

can be excavated by closely analyzing the sensuous poetry of *Shir HaShirim*, tracing the thematic and physical threads from the text through the two holy-days, and placing them all in their complex web of contexts.

In this chapter, I unpack the interpretations of *Shir HaShirim* against which I am arguing, place the *megillah* in historical context as well as in context of the *Pesach*, and explore the possible connection between *Shir HaShirim* and the semi-extinct festival of *Tu B'Av*. Following that, I analyze the poetic and dialogic language of *Shir HaShirim*, the opportunities for embodiment and unfettered energy embedded in the text, and the significance of centering a woman's (the Raaya's) voice in this *megillah* in terms of its function for hope and futurity.

Discordant Notes: The Allegory and the Drama Theory

One longstanding argument about the *megillah* containing this epic tale of love is the insistence on a nonliteral interpretation of the extremely erotic text. The sensual poetry depicting desire made explicit led generations of exegetes to insist that such a text cannot have a place in the holy biblical canon. The fact that it did, albeit narrowly, earn one led those opposed to its erotic content to propose and continue to push an allegorical interpretation of *Shir HaShirim*: this deeply bodied tale of young love and lust was transformed into a story of the noncorporeal love between God and the Jewish people.[269] Though there is room for an allegorical reading of *Shir HaShirim*, the allegory is often positioned as a replacement for the actual text, rather than a gloss. For example, the widely circulated ArtScroll edition of *Shir HaShirim* provides only the allegorical "translation" of the *megillah*.[270][271] Presenting any text purely through its allegorical

[269] Robert Alter delves further into what contributed to the allegorical argument in his introduction to his own non-allegorical translation of *Shir HaShirim.* See "The Song of Songs." *Strong as Death is Love: The Songs of Songs, Ruth, Esther, Jonah, and Daniel*. W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2015, 3.
[270] *Shir HaShirim*, translated by Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz, ArtsScroll Mesorah Publications, 1 October 1976.
[271] ArtScroll's editions of biblical and liturgical texts have held a place at the peak of popularity in American diasporic communities for decades, in part due to the accessibility of the English translations they provide. This makes their allegory-only choice for *Shir HaShirim* even more problematic: Due to their popularity and the trust that

reading means that whatever is contained in the original is lost. Even if it ultimately can be read as an allegory, one first needs to understand the base text onto which the allegorical interpretation is being mapped. Otherwise, there is a sacrifice of complexity at the altar of censorship. This is the key flaw with the dominance of presenting *Shir HaShirim* as an allegory.

The other popular, problematic reading, which I am not suggesting in my theorization of the performance potential of *Shir HaShirim*, is the drama theory. This figuration of *Shir HaShirim* reached its peak in discursive dominance between 1820-1920.[272] This was influenced by the 18th century shift of focus in Protestant exegetics, moving from governance by contemporaneous church theology to a grounding in "the time and place of the authors of the Bible" (i.e., bringing the original context of a biblical text to the forefront in analysis and interpretation), as well as society's gradual adoption of a perception of marriage as a union based on love and sexual attraction rather than a dynastic and/or financial arrangement.[273] The drama theory relied on *Shir HaShirim* being both a literal and a historical text, which required some historical contortionism on the part of its proponents in order to make the details in the text and its supposed origins fit together. The *megillah* was dated to the time of King Shlomo due to his inclusion in the narrative as well as the attribution of authorship of the text to the early Davidic king stemming from the translation of the introductory line of the Song.[274] That opening line, "שִׁיר הַשִּׁירִים אֲשֶׁר לִשְׁלֹמֹה"[275] poses a dilemma in the form of the letter "*lammed*" preceding

comes with it, this may well be the only version of *Shir HaShirim* available to or accessed by a number of readers to whom the original Hebrew is difficult or illegible.

[272] Schellenberg, Annette. "The Song of Songs Through the Ages: Introduction." *The Song of Songs Through the Ages: Essays on the Song's Reception History in Different Times, Contexts, and Genres*, edited by Annette Shellenberg, Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2023, 8.

[273] Birnbaum, Elizabeth. "The Song of Songs as a Drama: A Radical Change of Interpretation in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century." *The Song of Songs Through the Ages: Essays on the Song's Reception History in Different Times, Contexts, and Genres*, edited by Annette Shellenberg, Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2023, 363.

[274] Birnbaum, Elizabeth. "The Song of Songs as a Drama: A Radical Change of Interpretation in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century." *The Song of Songs Through the Ages: Essays on the Song's Reception History in Different Times, Contexts, and Genres*, edited by Annette Shellenberg, Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2023, 368-370.

[275] Song of Songs 1:1.

Shlomo's name. The letter functions as a preposition that could mean "to," "for," or "of," making the line read, respectively: "Song of songs that is to Shlomo," "Song of songs that is for Shlomo," or "Song of songs that is of Shlomo." This allows for interpretations of the text as being in the style of, inspired by, dedicated to, or authored by the king.

Proponents of the drama theory divided into two primary schools of thought regarding the narrative being portrayed in said drama. The first version, championed by J.F. Jacobi, is the "love triangle" interpretation, creating a narrative of romantic competition and abduction in which King Shlomo kidnaps the beautiful protagonist in an effort to convince her to join his harem. She, however, is already in love with her childhood playmate, a fellow shepherd, and therefore rebuffs all of the king's advances.[276] This interpretation originated among Christian exegetes in an attempt to mitigate the sensuality of the text by ascribing to the king all of the lines that were perceived as "problematic," thereby crafting a contrasting story of innocent love between the shepherd and shepherdess and deriving a moral lesson in chastity and fidelity based on that.

The love triangle idea made its way to Jewish exegetes, grounded in an assertion from the early medieval biblical commentator Ibn Ezra. Ibn Ezra's commentary itself aligns with the text: he simply clarifies that the king and shepherd are two separate characters in the *megillah*, as is evident through the line "מָשְׁכֵנִי אַחֲרֶיךָ נָּרוּצָה הֱבִיאַנִי הַמֶּלֶךְ חֲדָרָיו נָגִילָה וְנִשְׂמְחָה בָּךְ נַזְכִּירָה דֹדֶיךָ מִיַּיִן מֵישָׁרִים אֲהֵבוּךָ/Draw me after you and we will run, the king has brought me to his chambers – let us exult and rejoice in you – let us remember, my beloved, your love is richer than wine."[277] Ibn Ezra interprets the prefix "הֶ" as introducing a hypothetical, reading the line as "…**should** the king

[276] Birnbaum, Elizabeth. "The Song of Songs as a Drama: A Radical Change of Interpretation in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century." *The Song of Songs Through the Ages: Essays on the Song's Reception History in Different Times, Contexts, and Genres*, edited by Annette Shellenberg, Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2023, 374.
[277] Song of Songs 1:4, translation my own.

bring me to his chambers…" and thus creating a contrast within the Raaya's lines such that she is insisting that she would prefer the Dod's love even to that of the king. Ibn Ezra's encoded decoding of that "ה" has biblical precedent, particularly in similarly poetic texts such as the *Tehillim*. In Psalm 116, for example, the prefix is similarly deployed in the statement "הֶאֱמַנְתִּי כִּי אֲדַבֵּר/I **will** believe though I said I have suffered a great deal."[278] In this case, the poet positions the (at present purely hypothetical) future belief in contrast to their past complaints of suffering, using the "ה" to fluidly juxtapose the two parts of the phrase. This is what Ibn Ezra reads into the line beloved by the love triangle supporters; the 19th-century exegetes take that interpretation several steps past the text in an attempt to erase/overwrite the sensuality of the young lovers via the distinction between the king and shepherd characters.

The love triangle interpretation pushes even further from the text through translations like that of Hebrew translator Julius Friedrich Bottcher, cited by Birnbaum. I argue that Bottcher adds stage directions that have no grounding in the text, but rather serve to reallocate and underplay the sexier lines. He turns one of the sections of natural imagery-laden descriptive dialogue of the Raaya's body into a scene of debauchery denied, taking the following verses:

אָמַרְתִּי אֶעֱלֶה בְתָמָר אֹחֲזָה בְּסַנְסִנָּיו וְיִהְיוּ־נָא שָׁדַיִךְ כְּאֶשְׁכְּלוֹת הַגֶּפֶן וְרֵיחַ אַפֵּךְ כַּתַּפּוּחִים/

I say, let me climb the palm,

Let me take hold of its branches,

And let your breasts be like bunches of grapes,

The scent of apples in your nose.

וְחִכֵּךְ כְּיֵין הַטּוֹב הוֹלֵךְ לְדוֹדִי לְמֵישָׁרִים דּוֹבֵב שִׂפְתֵי יְשֵׁנִים/

And your mouth like the best wine-

Let it flow right to my beloved,

[278] Psalms 116:10, translation my own.

Gliding over slumbering lips.[279]

These lines are a dialogue between the Raaya and the Dod, the young lover and beloved, in which they express their mutual physical desire through heightened and pastoral language. Bottecher transforms those same lines into a three-person drama:

> *Solomon (approaching with yearning desire)*: I thought: I want to climb upward on the palm, touch its pendulous palm leaves! Would your breasts become like grapes of the vine *(pointing to the fruit basket)* and the fragrance of your breath like the fragrance of quinces *(handing her a wine goblet and trying to kiss her)* and your kissable lips like the most beautiful wine! *The female vintner (evading the king and going to kiss the entering shepherd)*: It goes straight to my darling, sidling over his crimson lips.[280]

Bottecher pushes past the bounds of translation into the realm of adaptation and reinterpretation, more Disney's *Hercules* than Emily Wilson's *The Odyssey* to Homer's original epic. The fruit basket and wine goblet appear from the ether, providing even more protection against sensuality by making those phrases both come from the foiled seducer and literal props. The entrance of the Dod mid-verse is similarly unsupported by the text of the *megillah*, and Bottecher, who had only one verse back been so invested in turning the metaphorical into the literal, completely disregards the last word of verse 10, substituting a seemingly-random "crimson" in place of any version of "sleeping/slumbering." Could this also be to take the rather sexy poem further away from the bedroom, in the spirit of the Protestant and Victorian performative propriety that drove exegetes to the contortions of the love triangle interpretation? This dance around the sensual

[279] Song of Songs 7:9-10, translation my own.
[280] Birnbaum, Elizabeth. "The Song of Songs as a Drama: A Radical Change of Interpretation in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century." *The Song of Songs Through the Ages: Essays on the Song's Reception History in Different Times, Contexts, and Genres*, edited by Annette Shellenberg, Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2023, 378.

essence of *Shir HaShirim* turns the text into a drama, but in doing so paints a picture that bears little resemblance to the original.

The second version of the drama theory turns King Shlomo himself into the innocent lover of a shepherdess, creating a chaste rewriting through overly-literal translations of the sensual poetry. Moving even beyond Bottecher's mingling of literal and metaphorical to mitigate the sexual overtones of the imagery, the exegetes who proposed what Elizabeth Birnbaum dubs the "Unspoiled Oriental" version argue for taking all of the language at what I would contend is even less than face value.[281] This time, King Shlomo is an avid gardener who devotes whole passages of his supposedly self-authored, six-act romantic drama to contemplations of his actual flowers. The Raaya is desexualized through infantilization, a "country girl without much of a brain…humble and childlike but also chaste, pure, and virtuous."[282] Thus her lines, too, become literal, a "childlike" girl overawed by the majesty of the world, not even contemplating any carnality.

Both versions depend on a conflation of ancient Israel with contemporaneous perceptions of the Middle East, which was, in turn, colored by the Orientalism that had swept through Europe. The exegetes contrasting the chastity of the Raaya to the harem of King Shlomo, through her fidelity to her humble childhood friend or her innocent love for the king himself, were influenced by the warped European idea of Muslim sultans and their vibrant courts, alternatively demonized and romanticized in Western writing.[283] Simultaneously, the drama theory placed *Shir HaShirim* in two inappropriate contexts: the inaccurate present and the incorrect past.

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[281] Birnbaum, Elizabeth. "The Song of Songs as a Drama: A Radical Change of Interpretation in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century." *The Song of Songs Through the Ages: Essays on the Song's Reception History in Different Times, Contexts, and Genres*, edited by Annette Shellenberg, Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2023, 380-381.
[282] Ibid. 381-382.
[283] Ibid. 384.

Where and When Did The Song Begin?

Robert Alter asserts that the dialogue and "dramatic action" of *Shir HaShirim* was "surely not [performed] in some formal drama."[284] I might agree with him on the "formal" part of that argument in the sense that *Shir HaShirim* does not lend itself to the fourth-wall-maintaining, passively witnessed theatre popularized in West over the past couple of centuries; however, I see within it and surrounding it the potential for a collective, immersive drama, a communal theatre. Both Alter's conception of what it would mean to read *Shir HaShirim* through the lens of performance and the drama theory appear to me to be based on a very particular perception of what theatre is. Their objections to or support of the *megillah* as theatrical are dependent on "theatre" aligning with the Euro-centric understanding of theatre as a spectated (linear) narrative and on it being diametrically opposed to "ritual" rather than deeply intertwined with it.

Furthermore, neither argument seems to take into account the historical context of *Shir HaShirim*. The "historical" turn in interpretation of the *megillah* that foregrounds both branches of the drama theory ironically forces *Shir HaShirim* out of its likely real origins at the end of the First Diaspora,[285] a time of great instability in which both practical and philosophical questions of collective Jewish life and identity were at the forefront, in contrast to the era of relative stability and cohesion that characterized the biblical reign of King Shlomo. Such a shift fundamentally alters analysis of the text, whether one is reading it allegorically or literally. It changes the questions to which the *megillah* is offering answers, since the possible reasons for writing/recording it in the first place would be very different sets of options in a time in which the Israelite people had been living together in their homeland for centuries and under a unified monarchy for three reigns already; the First Temple was either built or in process, which further

[284] Alter, Robert. "The Garden of Metaphor." *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, Basic Books, 2011, 234.
[285] Bloch, Ariel A. and Chana Bloch. "Introductory Note." *The Song of Songs: A New Translation with an Introduction and Commentary*. University of California Press, 1 January 1998, 133.

provided a center for united Israelite life and identity; and the combined work of King David and King Shlomo ensured that the reign of the latter was an extended period of peace and prosperity both internally and in terms of international relations. Though it was a time of relief and excitement, the return from the First Diaspora had none of the stabilizing features of the reign of King Shlomo.

Early 20th century theologian and translator Franz Rosenzweig offers a different route out of the conundrum of interpreting *Shir HaShirim*. He suggests that the text is theomorphic rather than anthropomorphic,[286] that it is not literal or allegorical, a scroll extolling divine love or worldly love, but rather both because the latter is an expression and reflection of the former:

> Rosenzweig's conception does not try to detect a hidden meaning behind a literal one. Rather, the "deeper meaning" is "precisely *in* [*sic*] the purely sensual sense": it is one and the same…human and divine language contain each other directly and immediately. In other words, the text does not contain *two* [*sic*] meanings, a literal and a spiritual sense, but the two – the human and the divine – are absolutely and completely and essentially *one* [*sic*]: they do not and cannot exist without one another.[287]

This not only lends credence to analyzing *Shir HaShirim* through both its literal and allegorical meanings, but also offers support and solace for a people in crisis as they try to sort out their relationship with one another and their God during the turbulent times of reorganization in the Second Temple Period, offering answers to questions of identity that emerged from the return and reassertion of indigenous rule: Who are we when we return from a century-long diaspora?

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[286] Sauter, Caroline. "Love and Language: The Song of Songs in Scholem and Rosenzweig." *The Song of Songs through the Ages: Essays on the Song's Reception History in Different Times, Contexts, and Genres*. Edited by Annette Schellenberg, Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2024, 407.
[287] Sauter, Caroline. "Love and Language: The Song of Songs in Scholem and Rosenzweig." *The Song of Songs through the Ages: Essays on the Song's Reception History in Different Times, Contexts, and Genres*. Edited by Annette Schellenberg, Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2024, 410.

What does it mean to be independent in our indigenous land and together again? How do we recover from the destructive disbursement of the Second Diaspora? Who will we become now?

In contrast to the proponents of the drama theory who force the text into deeply literal play that requires extreme deviations and un- or weakly-founded additions, I am not attempting to prove the historicity of *Shir HaShirim* as a drama, but rather its potential and the power to answer these questions and similar ones that arise at communal crisis points, the potential and power that lies in its deployment as an embodied text, particularly when paired with both *Pesach* and *Tu B'Av* practices. Nevertheless, the drama theory helps bolster my interpretation in that it demonstrates that a large number of scholars have previously also seen the hallmarks of performance texts in the *megillah* (such scholars interpreted them as clues rather than building blocks/tools), the ways in which *Shir HaShirim* lends itself to theatricalization, calls out for bodies to bring it to life. It does not need to be a Realist drama or a literalistic, moralistic melodrama in order to move from page to stage. This *megillah* lends itself to embodied traditions that challenge the bounds of Western-centric conceptions of performance, tied as the text is to two festivals full of communal dance and re-embodied dramatization.

This tie is further emphasized by the repeated return of the metaphorical and literal language of the lovers to the vineyards, an emphasis that draws further parallels between *Shir HaShirim* and *Tu B'Av* (to be explored further below). The debate that catalyzed Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel's declaration of *Tu B'Av* as a festival comparable to *Yom Kippur* centered around a question regarding what holy-day was meant by a line in *Shoftim* that refers to the "annual festival of the Lord" in Shiloh, in which the young women join together in a dance by the vineyards.[288] He, and subsequent biblical scholars and theologians, have extrapolated from the location, time in the agricultural cycle, and activities of the young people in the verses that this

[288] Judges 21:19-21, translation my own.

puzzling reference is describing a *Tu B'Av* celebration. In her exploration of the roles of women in ancient Israel, Dr. Susan Ackerman argues that this dancing instead took place on *Sukkot*,[289] founding that argument in the reference to this dancing as taking place during "the ingathering/pilgramage." That phrase, however, could also refer to *Pesach*, both complicating and strengthening the connection between the two celebrations. Ackerman's chapter explores women's role as ritual musicians, in this context in response to a divine victory. By asserting this, Ackerman once again actually provides support for my argument: that contextualization appears to connect most directly to *Pesach*, though the Exodus is celebrated across the Jewish calendar along with other such miracle-attributed triumphs. If the camp of Rabban Gamliel is correct, the rabbinic interpretation of the origins of *Tu B'Av* during the wandering in the wilderness following the Exodus could tie the two together and resolve the conundrum of the referent phrase, connecting the dance to both the pilgrimage of *Pesach* and the celebratory dancing of *Tu B'Av*.

Whenever in the Jewish calendar the dancing in the debated *Shoftim* passage actually takes place, the festival is suggested as the solution to a crisis, a means of mending divisions following a small but devastating civil war in pre-monarchical ancient Israel. The tribe of Benjamin had failed to punish criminals who committed a horrific sexual crime, so the other tribes turned against Benjamin. In addition to military action, the adult men of the combatant tribes swore an oath that they would not arrange marriages between their daughters and the men of Benjamin. Following the war, however, the reconciling camps realized that the now-decimated tribe of Benjamin would die out entirely as a result of their oath. A solution was proposed: the unmarried young men from the tribe of Benjamin would go to the festival and there find their future brides, thus skirting the oath made by the fathers of the other tribes by allowing young people to choose their own spouses. The suggestion succeeds: the tribe of Benjamin is restored

[289] Literally "huts," a seven-/eight-day festival and the third of the *Regalim* on the biblical calendar

through these unchaperoned matches, and the tribes move on from this incident into an era of greater unity under the first monarch of a unified kingdom of Israel (one from the tribe of Benjamin, no less). Thus this dancing offers a blueprint for the Jews rebuilding and reestablishing an independent country of Israel during the Second Temple Period, a referent to another point in Jewish history during which the people came together out of conflict and crisis to build toward a unified identity.

The Ordering of *Pesach*

Softened by the allegorical interpretation, *Shir HaShirim* was accepted and integrated into the cycle of congregational readings, ultimately attached to one of the most important holidays on the Jewish calendar, the first of the three *Regalim*.[290] The three *Regalim* were celebrated through pilgrimages to the Temple in Jerusalem during the First and Second Temple Periods. For each of the *Regalim,* celebrants would bring sacrifices of grain, fruit, and farm animals that aligned with the point in the agricultural cycle at which they occurred. *Shir HaShirim* was attached to *Pesach*,[291] the festival of spring and holiday of freedom.

Pesach is the annual seven- to eight-day holiday[292] celebrating the Israelite exodus from slavery in Egypt and the transition of Israelites from a family into a nation. The holiday is alternatively known as *Khag Ha'Matzot*, *Khag Ha'Aviv*, and *Khag Ha'Kheirut*[293] due to its backstory, timing on the agricultural calendar, and central symbolic food, respectively. *Shir HaShirim* is traditionally read during morning services on the Shabbat that falls during *Pesach*, and thus is seemingly somewhat outshone by the detailed and dramatic rituals surrounding it. To commemorate the haste with which the Israelites had to leave Egypt, which left them no time to

[290] Literally "legs" or "feet"
[291] Passover
[292] Seven days in Israel, eight in the Diaspora due to concerns about miscalculations of the months that turned into traditions over time.
[293] The Festival of Freedom, The Festival of Spring, and The Festival of *Matzah* (translation my own).

allow their bread to rise, Jews do not eat leavened grains on *Pesach*. This practice is put into play to varying degrees of stringency: following Jewish codes of law, one avoids all grains that could become leavened (known collectively as *khametz*), eating only wheat that has been made into *matzah* through a painstaking and carefully-timed baking process prior to the holiday. We thoroughly clean our houses and use different or re-kashered[294] sets of tableware and cookware in order to prevent any potential contamination. We set the stage and then immerse ourselves in a different world, a heterotopia in which the everyday dictates that are suspended are replaced by a new set of rules.

Since the destruction of the Temples made the original practice of pilgrimage impossible, the week-plus of altered reality that is *Pesach* can be a time for extended family coming together. Even if a family does not gather for the whole holiday, most will go to great lengths to be together for a *seder.*[295][296] Literally translated as "order," the *Pesach seder* was established as an annual activity during the First Diasporic Period through a Talmudic transposition of *Pesach* practices during the time of the First Temple. In its full, lengthy form, it is a combination of a symbolic meal, immersive storytelling, guided discussion, and sing-along.

The "script" for the *seder* is the *Haggadah*,[297] a booklet divided into 14 sections of ritual action: *Kadesh*, *Urkhatz*, *Karpas*, *Yakhatz*, *Maggid*, *Rakhtzah*, *Motzi Matzah*, *Maror*, *Korekh*,[298] *Shulkhan Orekh*, *Tzafun*, *Barekh*, *Hallel*, *Nirtzah*.[299] *Kadesh*, *Karpas*, *Motzi Matzah*, *Maror*,

[294] "Kashering," from the word "kosher," refers to the process by which dishes, cookware, and other items that are used to cook, serve, or eat food are cleansed according to the laws of ritual purity.
[295] The ritual meal that is held on the first (and second, in Diaspora) night of *Pesach*
[296] As a lunar calendar, the Jewish temporality marks the start of a new day at sunset. As a result of this understanding of time, *Pesach* begins at night, and therefore opens with the *seder*.
[297] Literally "telling"
[298] A part of the *seder* that commemorates the first sandwich in recorded history! Not quite as neat and tasty as the one the Earl of Sandwich was said to have invented in order to play cards while eating, this sandwich consists of *matzah* and *maror*, with some adding the sweet fruit, spice, and wine concoction called *kharoset* and the original story of the sandwich also featuring part of the pascal sacrifice.
[299] Literal translations of the names of the sections are as follows: "Separating" or "Sanctifying," "And Washing," "Greens," "Divide," "Tell," "Washing," "Bringing Forth *Matzah*," "Bitter Herbs," "Sandwich," "Prepared Table," "Hidden," "Blessing," "Praising," and "Wanted."

Korekh, and *Tzafun* all involve symbolic eating or drinking, in addition to the ceremonial four cups of wine (or grape juice) to be drunk at particular moments during the *seder* and the less symbol-heavy – though often deeply traditional – meal that constitutes *Shulkhan Orekh*. *Urkhatz* and *Rakhtzah* both center on ritual hand-washing; *Barekh* is the Grace After Meals, augmented to include special subsections specific to *Pesach*. *Maggid*, *Hallel*, and *Nirtzah* are devoted to recitation and discussion, a sort of interactive performance that is part scripted and part improvised. Physical *Haggadot*[300] can carry their own highly individualized stories on their pages in addition to the one printed within: wine stains, notes in the margins, and other happy hauntings of *seders* and generations past can be passed down with the booklets themselves, allowing family members and memories to share a metaphysical/metaphorical space at the table with the legend of the Exodus.

As much as the *seder* pulls participants into the past, there is also a focus on the futurity of the Jewish people in the form of highlighting and promoting children's participation. The "Four Questions," derived from a Talmudic discussion of the significance of the *seder*, are traditionally asked/sung by the youngest members of the company assembled and answered by the rest of the party. Children are encouraged to engage with the story through songs, questions, prompts, and even props.[301] There is a half-humorous, half-serious response of "So the children will ask!" that can be and is applied to questions regarding almost any elements of *Pesach* practice and tradition. This refrain stems from the centrality of discussion and debate to *Pesach*, the *seder* in particular, and the concept of the need to engage with the story and experience of the

[300] Plural of *Haggadah*

[301] I have a vivid memory of my uncle using kosher-for-*Pesach* jello to turn his water red in order to reenact the plague of blood and tossing ping pong balls across the long table to reenact the plague of hail, among other dramatic moments enacted around *seder* tables across the years.

Exodus "in each and every generation," as is expressed and emphasized through the following segment of the *Haggadah*, which in turn quotes Talmudic and biblical texts:

> בְּכָל־דּוֹר וָדוֹר חַיָּב אָדָם לִרְאוֹת אֶת־עַצְמוֹ כְּאִלּוּ הוּא יָצָא מִמִּצְרַיִם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: וְהִגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לֵאמֹר בַּעֲבוּר זֶה עָשָׂה יְיָ לִי בְּצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרָיִם. לֹא אֶת־אֲבוֹתֵינוּ בִּלְבַד גָּאַל הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא, אֶלָּא אַף אוֹתָנוּ גָּאַל עִמָּהֶם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: וְאוֹתָנוּ הוֹצִיא מִשָּׁם, לְמַעַן הָבִיא אוֹתָנוּ, לָתֶת לָנוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לַאֲבֹתֵינוּ
>
> /In every generation after generation, a person is required to see himself as if he came out of Egypt, as it says: "And you will tell your children on this day to say 'For this reason God did this for me by bringing me out of Egypt.'" God did not just free our ancestors alone; rather [God] also freed us with them, as it says: "And [God] freed us from there, in order to bring us, to give us the land [God] pledged to our ancestors.[302]

This directive suggests that the simple "telling" of the story of the Exodus implied by the name of the *Haggadah* is insufficient: celebrants must imagine themselves as direct participants in and beneficiaries of the Exodus, regardless of how chronologically distant they are from the actual legendary event. The *seder* thus becomes a re-enactment of the Exodus, from the bitter herbs (*Maror*) and saltwater (in which the *Karpas* is dipped) consumed to represent the suffering and tears of the Israelites in slavery, to the songs of praise sung at the end (*Hallel* and *Nirtzah*), paralleling the celebratory songs sung on the shores of the Reed Sea at the moment of liberation. This requires both embodiment and a suspension of the strictures of linear temporality, a well-tested formula for immersive ritual and effective and affective performance.

This re-enactment, the *seder*, can last anywhere from a couple of hours to the entire night, with a noted instance in the writings of Maimonides of a *seder* held by Mishnaic rabbis that ended up extending beyond sunrise and encroaching on the time of morning prayers.[303][304] With

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[302] הגדה של פסח – *The Passover Haggadah*, Maxwell House, 2015, 24. Translation my own.
[303] Maimonides, "הילכות חמץ ומצה/The Laws of Leavened and Unleavened Bread." *Mishneh Torah* 9:5, Sefaria.org.
[304] This story has also been incorporated into the *Haggadah* itself, a sort of re-enactment oroborus.

this potentially protracted event taking up the first one or two nights of *Pesach*,[305] sometimes even coinciding with Friday night, the morning services of Shabbat on *Pesach* can be a sleepy affair into which the secondary reading of *Shir HaShirim* can appear to be swallowed by the order of the days.

Furthermore, as far as outshining the reading, in some Mizrahi communities, the celebration of *Mimouna* bookends *Pesach* on the opposite end of the seven or eight days. Traditionally, *Mimouna* is celebrated outdoors, or in houses with their doors flung open, with members of Mizrahi Jewish communities gathering over sweet foods prepared before *Pesach* and sold to non-Jews for the duration of the holiday and/or baked after the final day of *Pesach* as soon as it is permissible to buy back one's *khametz*.[306] As is the case with the *seder*, it is customary to invite anyone who wishes to partake in the meal to join in and eat with any family present, inside their homes or in public gathering places. Platters piled high with honey-covered cookies and sticky silan drizzled over stacks of *mufleta*, bowls overflowing with candied fruits and sugary peels, nutty nougat, and steaming cups of tea are only a small selection of the sweet treats featured at *Mimouna* celebrations. Tables are also decorated with live fish swimming in bowls, sheaves of wheat interspersed with pods of beans, and fragrant flower petals scattered amongst the array of dishes on dazzlingly white tablecloths. Nothing is there without a purpose. The foods meant to be consumed are all sweet, symbolizing the wish for a sweet year[307] and sweetness in the gathering itself.[308] The items not meant to be eaten hold meaning as well: the

[305] There are two *seders*, one on each of the first two nights of *Pesach*, in the diaspora, but only one on the first night in Israel.
[306] There is a loophole that allows Jews to sell prohibited food items to their non-Jewish friends and neighbors. That is accomplished by the two parties drawing up a contract and ensuring that the non-Jewish party has access to the house wherein the foods are stored, and then it is "bought back" at the end of Passover, right before Mimouna starts.
[307] Passover is the beginning of the biblical year; the celebration of the New Year known as ראש השנה is actually the seventh month in the cycle and commemorates what is believed to be the anniversary of the creation of the world.
[308] Raviv, Yael. "NO TABLE REQUIRED: Consumption and the Public Sphere." *Falafel Nation: Cuisine and the Making of National Identity in Israel*. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln; London, 2015, 182–208

fish represent abundance or fertility,[309] and the sheaves of wheat represent prosperity, the bean pods symbolize the coming spring and are often displayed in formations of seven to invoke the memory of the seventh day after the Israelites left Egypt, on which they reached the Reed Sea.

In addition to their metaphysical meaning, the foods found at *Mimouna* are also a cross-section of the cultures in which Mizrahi Jews have been immersed since their exile from the Land of Israel of old. The flavors of *Mimouna* fare are not dissimilar, in their intercultural culinary heritage, to the African and Native American influences that fed the roots of "soul food."[310] In past centuries, the Muslim neighbors of Mizrahi Jews were even known to bring flour or baked goods to Jewish houses on the night of the *Mimouna* festival in order to aid in the celebration and provide ingredients that the Jews were not allowed to own during *Pesach*.[311] Like what has come to be considered classic Southern food, the dishes served at *Mimouna* celebrations can trace their origins to a blending of the palates of the indigenous and non-consensually transplanted peoples. Placed in a third, European-American context – the surroundings of a larger number of non-consensually transplanted Ashkenazi Jews – the blend comes to symbolize not only the unity of the two cultures, but also their status of "other" in conjunction with the Ashkenormativity[312] imposed by external perceptions of Jewishness.[313]

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[309] Fish are traditionally associated with procreation in Judaism, a connection derived from the biblical blessing of Jacob given to his grandsons in Genesis 48:16.
[310] Deetz, Kelley Fanto. "How Enslaved Chefs Helped Shape American Cuisine." *Smithsonian Magazine*. 20 July 2018.
[311] Berg, Nancy E. "Jews among Muslims: Culinary Contexts." *Global Jewish Foodways: A History*, edited by Hasia R. Diner and Simone Cinotto. University of Nebraska Press. 2018, 70–88.
[312] Ashkenormativity is the assumption that all Jews are Ashkenazi and thus are white-passing, western, and adhere to Ashkenazi traditions. It is rather commonplace in the United States and much of Europe, and in Western perceptions of who and what Jews are, Ashkenazi is positioned as the norm and Sephardi/Mizrahi (or Ethiopian or Yemenite) as the Other.
[313] Booker, Jennifer Hill. "Fighting Stereotypes, One Dinner at a Time." James Beard Foundation. 14 February 2018.

Mimouna also contains the embodied memory of a secondary exodus: particularly in the late 19th and entire 20th centuries, Jews in MENA countries fled violence and prejudice to seek safe haven in what was re-established as an independent State of Israel in 1948. In the latter half of the 20th century, mere decades into the existence of this reborn state, MENA Jews in Israel began to reassert their blended cultural identities through the reclamation of the *Mimouna* festival. In doing so, Jews from a variety of North African and other Mediterranean diasporic countries came together and formed a new cultural identity as Mizrahi Jews in Israel. The *Mimouna* celebration became a site of connection for Jewish refugees from Morocco and Tunisia in particular. The newly-labelled Mizrahi Jews began gathering en masse after night fell following the final day of *Pesach*, reveling in shared foods and festivities as well as recovering from similar traumas following the waves of violent antisemitism in their former host countries that motivated their flights to Israel – experiences which also provided further points of connection for reunification with Jews who had suffered through expulsions, pogroms, blood libels, and violent persecution in other diasporic locations.[314]

Before the food is finished and the dregs of tea have cooled in the breeze of the desert evening, the *Mimouna* features a reenactment preceding the multisensory revival of community, body, and spirit around the table of symbols. Shoes are discarded on the shore and celebrants wade into the nearest body of water, the waves lapping at their legs recalling those of the Reed Sea in the harrowing moments before it split to afford the fleeing, liberated Israelites safe passage and then crashing down over the heads of their enslavers in close pursuit.

[314] Sharaby, Rachel. "Political Activism and Ethnic Revival of a Cultural Symbol." *Ethnicities*, vol. 11, no. 4, 2011, 489–511.

כל בני המשפחה טבלו את רגליהם במים. מנהג זה נקרא בקהילות אחדות… הטובלים במים היו מפנים את גבם לים, ממלאים ידיהם מים, זורקים את המים מאחורי גבם, ואומרים: '...לך בן הרס, לך כאב, לכו מזיקים'

/...All of the members of the family immersed their legs in the water. It was a tradition in some communities… [for] those immersing in the water to turn their backs to the sea, fill their hands with water, throw the water behind their backs, and say: 'Go [away] sons of destruction, go [away] pain, go [away] pests.[315]

The performance is twofold: the reenactment serves as a closing ceremony for *Pesach*, the holiday commemorating the Exodus from Egypt, and the immersion and water-throwing are meant to cleanse the body and soul, ushering in a season of renewal and health.

Sandwiched between the *seder* and *Mimouna* or even simply stuck into the organized disorder of the days of *Pesach* following the *seders*, the calm communal reading of *Shir HaShirim* can turn into something of an afterthought. The *megillah*'s association with *Pesach* and its power and importance are overshadowed. I argue, however, that the *megillah* is very much at home among the practices of *Pesach*, and the text and traditions paired together transform into an affective force with which to be reckoned.

Palimpsestic Possibilities

The significance and power of *Shir HaShirim* has periodically been recognized in bursts of appreciation for the text as it went in and out of theological "style," including in the early arguments for its inclusion in the Hebrew biblical canon: "'If all the writings are holy,' Rabbi Akiva proclaimed in a discussion of the Song's canonicity, 'the Song of Songs is the holy of

[315] יגאל בן-נון/Yigal Bin-Nun. "On the Earliest Sources of the Mimuna [*sic*] / על מקורותיה הראשוניים של המימונה." *Pe'amim: Studies in Oriental Jewry / פעמים: רבעון לחקר קהילות ישראל במזרח*, no. 117, 2008, 141–166. Yad Itzhak Ben Zvi.

holies.'"[316] The term translated here as "the holy of holies" is also the name for the inner sanctum of the Temple which contained the Ark of the Covenant, within which the Tablets were said to be held. This was a space so sacred that only the *Kohein Gadol*[317] was allowed to enter it on the holiest day of the year (*Yom Kippur*), and even then only after extensive ritual and spiritual preparation.

Why would the much-respected sage of late antiquity Rabbi Akiva draw an analogy between this controversial addition to the Hebrew biblical canon and the most sacred of spaces? I posit that his comparison can be understood in the light of the power *Shir HaShirim* holds, the impact it had at its origin point in a time of crisis and the potential it carries to do the same in future crises. This positioning is strengthened through the connections between *Shir HaShirim* and its host holy-day: though not quite on the same level as *Yom Kippur*, *Pesach* is considered one of the most important dates on the Jewish calendar, to the point that it is said that those who violate the dietary rules of *Pesach* are subject to *karet*,[318] one of the worst possible biblical punishments. *Shir HaShirim* encapsulates central elements/lessons of *Pesach*, with the spring-like blossoming of the imagery and characters, the role of the larger community in the unfolding love story, and its linguistic and behavioral embracing of freedom and futurity.

These potential reasons carry over into another: *Shir HaShirim* not only pairs with a living holy-day, but also might function as a palimpsest for a celebration that largely died out in the Second Diaspora, the festival of *Tu B'Av*. On *Tu B'Av*, the unmarried women of Israel would lend one another white dresses and dance together in the valleys and vineyards. There, the unmarried young men could come meet them, and together they could choose partners to marry,

[316] Alter, Robert. "The Song of Songs." *Strong as Death is Love: The Songs of Songs, Ruth, Esther, Jonah, and Daniel*. W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2015, 3.
[317] High Priest
[318] Literally "cutting off," the exact nature of *karet* is subject to debate, with some interpreting it as being cut off from the rest of the Jewish people in the mortal world and/or the afterlife and others proposing that it means one's life will be prematurely cut off.

unfettered by social constructs such as wealth or by a need for parental permission. Some rabbis and other Jewish scholars have suggested deep connections between *Shir HaShirim* and the semi-extinct festival,[319] with the former possibly even containing descriptions of the latter.[320] The ties between the two leap out of the *megillah*'s text as they reflect the surviving recorded practices and themes of *Tu B'Av*: the unmarried women dancing, love and choosing for love, and the flowers/land in bloom.

Furthermore, as the Jewish calendar emerged from the agrarian society of ancient Israel, some authors have suggested a possible agricultural connection. As Paul Steinberg has discussed, Israeli botanist Noga Hareuveni explored this potential connection through the lens of her own field overlaid onto Talmudic debates: she proposes that *Tu B'Av* provides the closing brackets for the olive season opened with *Yom Kippur*, offering reasoning for Second Temple Period scholar Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel to have tied the two together.[321] Adding my own insights to Hareuveni's ideas, the basis of this connection leapt out to me: like *Shir HaShirim*, *Tu B'Av* is Talmudically tied to *Yom Kippur*, which elevates both as counterparts to the holiest day of the year. *Shir HaShirim* and *Tu B'Av* are thereby cast in the same role.

One possible origin for *Tu B'Av* is offered in the Talmud as an explanation for troubling passages in the biblical books of *Bamidbar*[322] and *Shoftim*[323] that appear to imply a prohibition on intertribal marriage within the tribes of Israel, which would not align with other biblical narratives that explicitly and implicitly include intertribal unions. *Tu B'Av* provided a potential explanation for this apparent contradiction:

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[319] Genack, Steven. "The Rebirth of Nine." Orthodox Union, 25 July 2025, https://www.ou.org/holidays/the-rebirth-of-nine/.
[320] Kadari, Tamar. "The Song of Songs and Tu B'Av Love Festivities." The Schechter Institutes, Inc., 7 December 2010, https://schechter.edu/the-song-of-songs-and-tu-bav-love-festivities/.
[321] Steinberg, Paul. "Tu b'Av: Coming Back to Life." *Celebrating the Jewish Year: The Spring and Summer Holidays*, edited by Janet Greenstein Potter, The Jewish Publication Society, 2009, 208-209.
[322] Numbers
[323] Judges

> The Rabbis of the Talmud recognized the hardship of this limitation and granted relief on Tu b'Av [*sic*], making it the one day of the year when the ban was lifted and people could marry outside their own tribes. Later, through various interpretations and inferences, the Rabbis went much further, deciding that this particular ban was intended only for the generation that originally inherited the Land of Israel and not for all Jews at all times. The sages completely repealed the ban, and that action, the Talmud says, was taken on Tu b'Av. From then on, intertribal marriage was permitted on any day that marriage itself was permitted.[324]

I would add to this explanation that the tracing of *Tu B'Av* as a Talmudic holiday would imply that it originated during the Second Temple Period, which strengthens the festival's ties to *Shir HaShirim* as a text from that same period and anchoring both text and holiday in the same post-diasporic crisis of identity and rebuilding. I posit that the later reframing of the ban also may explain why *Tu B'Av* fell out of practice in the Second Diaspora: if it was intended as a relief from that ban, then the lifting of the ban would render it redundant.

The Talmudic discussion of *Tu B'Av* offers more explanations for the festival, in which the connections to both *Pesach* and *Shir HaShirim* are ripe for the picking. According to the talmudic sages, *Tu B'Av* renews joy that has been dimmed by the period of mourning leading up to *Tisha B'Av*, bridging the happiness of the two new years, *Pesach* and *Rosh Ha'Shana*. This joy originates in the wilderness wherein the Israelites wandered for 40 years on their way from Egypt to Israel. Over the course of those four decades, 15,000 Israelites died as part of the punishment for the story of the spies.[325] The Israelites who knew they were subject to this punishment would anticipate *Tisha B'Av* as the day on which death was doled out annually, and

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[324] Steinberg, Paul. "Tu b'Av: Coming Back to Life." *Celebrating the Jewish Year: The Spring and Summer Holidays*, edited by Janet Greenstein Potter, The Jewish Publication Society, 2009, 209.
[325] See *Eicha* chapter for more detail on this story

therefore dig their own graves on the 8th of Av then sleep in said graves from the 9th to the 14th. This eased the burden of burial on the community, but also made the 15th of Av a day of celebration as the date on which the survivors annually sensed the dying was over and they could return to life.[326] This not only offers another possible origin story for the *Tu B'Av* festival, but also further ties *Tu B'Av* and *Pesach* by tying the Exodus story to the legendary origins of the 15th of Av as a day of celebration and futurity, both of which, I suggest, are central to the function and power of *Pesach* and *Shir HaShirim*.

Another explanation also grounds *Tu B'Av* in the pre-diasporic period, this time through its intrinsic connection to Jews' indigenous land. Returning to Hareuveni, she proposes a seasonal source for the white dresses donned by the young women dancing in *Tu B'Av* festivities: the festival would fall around the time of the full moon in late summer, when "large, white squill flowers begin to blossom all over Israel" and the olives are reaching peak ripeness for oil purposes. Hareuveni suggests that the young women wore white dresses as a nod to the blossoming white squills and danced, not in grape vineyards, but olive groves (which would also provide more space for dancing).[327] This agrarian approach supports the possibility that I propose: *Tu B'Av* fell out of practice in the Diaspora due to its attachment to the land of Israel and the difficulty, if not impossibility, of transposing the celebration from indigenous land to foreign climes. Hareuveni's offered origin also connects *Tu B'Av* to both the extremely natural and agrarian imagery that blooms on the pages of *Shir HaShirim* and the nature/agrarian/spring aspect of *Pesach* as the Festival of Spring. The latter transposes *Shir HaShirim* from summer to spring, but manages to keep it grounded in the flowering of the land and its life-giving powers,

[326] For a more in-depth dive into the mythological origins of *Tu B'Av* in the Talmud, see the following: Steinberg, Paul. "Tu b'Av: Coming Back to Life." *Celebrating the Jewish Year: The Spring and Summer Holidays*, edited by Janet Greenstein Potter, The Jewish Publication Society, 2009, 208-209.
[327] Steinberg, Paul. "Tu b'Av: Coming Back to Life." *Celebrating the Jewish Year: The Spring and Summer Holidays*, edited by Janet Greenstein Potter, The Jewish Publication Society, 2009, 210.

the renewal and youthful explosion of life that begins in spring and continues through summer. Thus the palimpsest of *Shir HaShirim* read on *Pesach* maintains the nature of the flowery poetry and its possible original host holiday of *Tu B'Av*.

In Dialogue with Poetry

That poetry is, itself, the subject of a debate over whether the *megillah* is a collection of thematically-related poems or a single piece:

> The Song of Songs is traditionally ascribed to King Solomon, although modern scholars debate its exact origin. Many are inclined to believe that several authors composed it over time, because such a variety of poetic devices is employed.[328]

In his assessment of the argument for multiple authorship, Robert Alter proposes the possibility that *Shir HaShirim* consists of a collection of Hebrew love poems written around the fourth century BCE.[329] Alter suggests that the alleged anthological nature of *Shir HaShirim* is an argument against it functioning as a drama, but I contend that, whether there was a single author or multiple, these chapters have been carefully arranged to form an emotional journey that very much can be embodied – no differently than one might perform verbatim theatre or any piece sourcing material from extent texts.

Furthermore, much of the argument for multiple authors lies in the stylistic variation of different sections; however, that could also be read as a deliberate choice by one author in order to portray the emotional journey of the characters contained within the narrative. Regardless of the number of authors, *Shir HaShirim* is meaningfully arranged in such a way that it speaks to an embodied emotional journey. Both the narrative and the characters further lend credence to the

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[328] Steinberg, Paul. "The Passover Love Story." *Celebrating the Jewish Year: The Spring and Summer Holidays*, edited by Janet Greenstein Potter, The Jewish Publication Society, 2009, 47.
[329] Alter, Robert. "The Song of Songs." *Strong as Death is Love: The Song of Songs, Ruth, Esther, Jonah, and Daniel*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2015, 3-4.

argument for the unity of the *megillah*, with the latter remaining recognizable as the same figures throughout the text. The former flows together, though not in a way that adheres to Western expectations for linear narratives: *Shir HaShirim* does not align with the Aristotelian model of dramatic structure, but rather takes the reader/audience on a unified emotional journey of young love, as evidenced by the repeated phrases and imagery evoked across sections of the *megillah*.

In his comparison of *Shir HaShirim* to ancient Egyptian love songs, Michael V. Fox's critiques of the structure of the *megillah* actually serve to support my reading of dialogic potential within the poetry:

> I read Canticles[330] as a single song whose unity resides in a network of repetends (repetitions with variation), associative sequences, stability of character portrayal, consistency of themes and style, and interwoven dialogue… But there is no overall symmetrical or hierarchical structure. It is as if the author of Canticles loosened up poetic structure to allow for a free-flowing sequence of thoughts and words, and relied instead on the flow of dialogue and cohesiveness of character portrayal to secure the song's unity.[331]

I argue that this "free-flowing sequence of the thoughts and words" is a strength of the text, not a weakness, as Fox would suggest. It makes the voices of the characters shine through, uninhibited by strict form so that it captures the sound of the struggle of young love.

The struggle is spoken of by the lovers themselves, conveyed by their conversations with each other and members of their community. *Shir HaShirim* reads as a dialogic narrative that can be performed, holding the potential to be reframed as a drama in the vein of other ancient epic poems and/or dances of love, as Craig Glickman explores in his book on the *megillah*:

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[330] An alternate, less word-for-word translation of *Shir HaShirim*.
[331] Fox, Michael V. "Rereading 'The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs' Thirty Years Later." *Die Welt Des Orients* 46, no. 1, 10.

> The Song isn't lengthy, but it is long enough to develop characters and a storyline more comprehensively than any other song I know, ancient or modern. It also captures all the themes love songs through the centuries have expressed: that love is unpredictable and often comes only after painful waiting; that it has magical, transforming power and promises to last a lifetime; that the loss of its intensity brings terrible pain, and the regaining of it is life itself.[332]

I would add to Glickman's assessment that not only is *Shir HaShirim* a narrative with rich characters, but the text is dialogic and dramatic, both in that the language is heightened and in that it lends itself to dramatizing through features such as conversations with a chorus of women and a rich exploration of space.[333]

This dramatic potential shines through in the exchanges between the two lovers. Like the other *megillot*, *Shir HaShirim* contains passages of back-and-forth dialogue between the characters which impart both personal and thematic detail. The two young lovers exchange exuberant exhortions of one another's virtues, their linguistic style creating parallels that imply connection and that the two are listening to one another. Both engage in lengthy, image-laden descriptions of the other's body. The heroine of *Shir HaShirim*, the Raaya, responds to the questioning of the Daughters of Jerusalem by detailing her beloved's beauty from head to toe, literally. She begins with his face and the hair that frames it:

> דּוֹדִי צַח וְאָדוֹם דָּגוּל מֵרְבָבָה
>
> רֹאשׁוֹ כֶּתֶם פָּז קְוֻצּוֹתָיו תַּלְתַּלִּים שְׁחֹרוֹת כָּעוֹרֵב
>
> /My beloved is fresh-faced and ruddy,

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[332] Glickman, Craig. "When Love Breaks Through." *Solomon's Song of Love*. Howard Publishing Co., Inc., 2004, 11.

[333] Birnbaum, Elizabeth. "The Song of Songs as a Drama." *The Song of Songs Through the Ages: Essays on the Song's Reception History in Different Times, Contexts, and Genres*, edited by Annette Shellenberg, Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2023, 368.

Standing out as the greatest among the multitudes.

His head is pure gold,

His hair curled,

Black as a raven.[334]

Her language takes flight, becoming increasingly flowery and full of sumptuous similes. She ends her exultant examination of the features of her love interest, the Dod, with a comparison of his legs to gold and marble pillars, before slipping in one last mention of his "sweet lips," returning to the subject that has consumed her thoughts since the opening line of the *megillah*.[335]

Only a few lines later, the Dod returns the favor, first with a short description of the Raaya's teeth and brow in pastoral language, comparing them to pregnant ewes and a split-open pomegranate.[336] This, evidently, proves to be insufficient, as he goes on to reverse her head-to-toe description and extolls her physical attributes from toe-to-head, beginning with her feet/legs[337] and thighs:

מַה־יָּפוּ פְעָמַיִךְ בַּנְּעָלִים בַּת־נָדִיב חַמּוּקֵי יְרֵכַיִךְ כְּמוֹ חֲלָאִים מַעֲשֵׂה יְדֵי אָמָּן

/How beautiful are your feet,

Shod in sandals, o noble daughter!

The curve of your thighs

Is like a bejeweled ornament

In the hands of a master craftsman.[338]

Also inverting the Raaya's previous speech on his features, the Dod begins by relating her body to man-made marvels, then shifts into comparisons to the natural world as he works his way up,

[334] Song of Songs 5:10-11, translation my own.
[335] Song of Songs 5:15-16.
[336] Song of Songs 6:6-7.
[337] The word for "foot" and "leg" is the same in Hebrew.
[338] Song of Songs 7:2, translation my own.

before also ending by expressing a yearning for the taste of her lips.[339] Unlike the Raaya, the Dod's description is spoken in second person – he is speaking directly to her. It might seem as though the Raaya's earlier list is uttered away from her beloved, recited only to the Daughters of Jerusalem, but his linguistic mirroring opens the door for him to have in some way overheard (which also offers a possible unwritten stage direction).

This exchange of complementary complimentary speeches is one of a number instances in *Shir HaShirim* of the lovers borrowing one another's language, which heightens the musicality of the text. Furthermore, the way in which the Dod takes the structure and style of the Raaya's list and playfully reverses it conveys careful listening and flirtatious wordplay. The effect is one of uplifting what could come off as dense blocks of imagery, instead transforming these sections into a compliment competition, an exchange of praise in which the two young lovers are actively engaging one another. This active engagement and their flirtatious intent is driven home by the mutual return to the subject of lips, their minds both still dwelling on the desire for kisses that opened the whole *megillah*.

Their dialogic mind-meld can also be seen in shorter exchanges between the young lovers. As in *Eicha*, the text of *Shir HaShirim* contains instances of interruption, in this case evidenced by lines of romantic longing switching from masculine to feminine conjugation or vice versa, implying a shift in speaker from the female lover to the male or male to female. For example, the Raaya responds immediately to the Dod's aforementioned listing of her attributes:

וְחִכֵּךְ כְּיֵין הַטּוֹב הוֹלֵךְ לְדוֹדִי לְמֵישָׁרִים דּוֹבֵב שִׂפְתֵי יְשֵׁנִים

And your mouth like the best wine-

Let it flow right to my beloved,

[339] Song of Songs 7:9-10.

Gliding over slumbering lips.[340]

The verse begins mid-thought, with the Dod finishing his complimentary comparison of the Raaya's body with her wine-like lips, conjugated here in the second person feminine: "חִכֵּךְ." The latter part of the verse, however, flips to the speaker addressing their beloved through the masculine term of endearment that has been used to refer to the male lover throughout the text: "דוֹדִי." Thus the text conveys conversation beyond exchanges of long-form love poetry. They go so far as to call out to one another several times across the text,[341] providing the central characters of the *megillah* with objectives. These young lovers are talking with and to one another as they chase connection/consummation, literary features of *Shir HaShirim* that lend themselves to adaptation into a fully embodied format.

So, too, do the exchanges between the Raaya and the Daughters of Jerusalem. The group of young women speaks as one, teasing out the thoughts and motivations of the romantic heroine through their conversations. They take on the familiar function of a chorus in performance texts: through question and answer exchanges and urging her to join them, the Daughters of Jerusalem operate as a means to allow the Raaya to explore her own feelings aloud. It is the Daughters of Jerusalem who prompt the Raaya's listing of the Dod's virtues through their inquiring after the Raaya's reasoning for loving the Dod so intensely, which in and of itself is a response to the Raaya urging them to swear an oath to communicate her lovesickness to the Dod.[342] The Daughters of Jerusalem serve as the Raaya's sounding board and an expository device; they drive the lovers to express their emotions and the plot forward. It is this chorus that alerts the audience to the literal or metaphorical absence or arrival of the lovers in several scenes through narration disguised as questions:

[340] Song of Songs 7:10, translation my own.
[341] Song of Songs 2:10-17, 5:2, 8:13-14.
[342] Song of Songs 5:8-9.

מִי זֹאת עֹלָה מִן־הַמִּדְבָּר כְּתִימְרוֹת עָשָׁן מְקֻטֶּרֶת מֹר וּלְבוֹנָה מִכֹּל אַבְקַת רוֹכֵל

/Who is this,

Coming up from the wilderness,

Like pillars of smoke

From incense of myrrh and frankincense,

All the wares of the spice merchant?[343]

The chorus of young women not only announces the entrance of the Raaya or her arrival in a new location, but also informs the audience of her state of being: the Raaya has ascended to holy happiness. The Daughters of Jerusalem compare her to the incense offering that was brought twice daily on a special altar in an inner chamber of the Temple in Jerusalem and featured prominently in the *Yom Kippur* rituals performed by the *Kohein Gadol* in the Holy of Holies.[344] Not only does the Raaya merit comparison to this special offering, but she also resembles <u>all</u> of the riches of a spice merchant; many such wares have been used by the Raaya and the Dod to describe one another across the chapters of *Shir HaShirim*, so the Daughters of Jerusalem's repetition with revision of the lovers' metaphor affirms and emphasizes the sweetness of their love.

In another instance of repetition with revision, the chorus proclaims the ultimate joining of the lovers in the final section of *Shir HaShirim*:

מִי זֹאת עֹלָה מִן־הַמִּדְבָּר מִתְרַפֶּקֶת עַל־דּוֹדָהּ

/Who is this,

Coming up from the wilderness,

Supported by her beloved?[345]

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[343] Song of Songs 3:6, translation my own.
[344] Providing another connection between *Shir HaShirim*, *Yom Kippur*, and *Tu B'Av*.
[345] Song of Songs 8:5, translation my own.

Both of these questions resemble the sort of "who is it who comes here?" rhetorical question of choruses in performance texts from the Mediterranean neighbors of ancient Jerusalem. This device can be found across a variety of surviving Athenian plays, pairing stage direction with layered narration, as Sophocles does with his chorus in *Antigone*:

> But here is Haimon, King, the last of all your sons.
>
> Is it grief for Antigone that brings him here,
>
> And bitterness at being robbed of his bride?[346]

Like the Daughters of Jerusalem, the chorus of *Antigone* speaks both directly to a character within the world of the piece and to the audience following the story. They herald the arrival of one of the (in this case star-crossed) lovers and update both their internal and external listeners on the state of the lover's feelings and relationship.

The chorus characters of *Shir HaShirim*, however, also directly intervene in the love story:

> אָנָה הָלַךְ דּוֹדֵךְ הַיָּפָה בַּנָּשִׁים אָנָה פָּנָה דוֹדֵךְ וּנְבַקְשֶׁנּוּ עִמָּךְ
>
> /Where has your beloved gone,
>
> O fairest of women?
>
> Where has your beloved turned?
>
> We will seek him with you.[347]

In their inquiries, the Daughters of Jerusalem are not merely confirming that the Dod is not present in the scene, they also offer to help the Raaya find him. They are not simply a sounding board or source of exposition: they form the Raaya's community, her support system. This communal effort helps drive the narrative toward the climax to which all that repetition with

[346] Sophocles. *Antigone*, translated by Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1949, 3.23-25.
[347] Song of Songs 6:1, translation my own.

revision has been building. The union of the lovers and their sendoff into the sunset (in the form of "mountains of spices"[348]) comes after the Daughters of Jerusalem answer another one of the Raaya's requests for an oath, this time to not "awaken love" until it is ready. The line that immediately follows this request is their announcement of the arrival of the Raaya with her beloved. This could be attributed to a mishandling of the division of the *megillah* into chapters, implying a sort of scene change between the Raaya's request and the Daughters of Jerusalem's proclamation. Without re-dividing the text, however, one might see the announcement as an answer to the Raaya's proffered oath: the Daughters of Jerusalem heralding the arrival of the lovers together can be read as an affirmation that love is ready to be fully awoken, that the time has come for them to move from yearning to union. They refer to the Dod as "support[ing]" the Raaya, the two of them emerging together from the wilderness, the space that has been the literal and metaphorical setting of much of their courtship. If this narrative is set during the *Tu B'Av* festival, then the lovers emerging from nature together implies that they are leaving the dance of the single youths and entering into a marriage of their own choosing, with the implicit blessing of the community in the form of the chorus who have driven the drama to this resolution.

Exploding Off the Page: Through the Body into the Future

In addition to the dancing, the text is ripe with opportunities for embodiment. Lines such as "אֲנִי יְשֵׁנָה וְלִבִּי עֵר קוֹל ו דוֹדִי דוֹפֵק/I am asleep and my heart is awake; my beloved knocks"[349] and "הָסֵבִּי עֵינַיִךְ מִנֶּגְדִּי/Turn your eyes away from me"[350] can be reframed as stage directions that emerge from within the text, beyond what can be included from surrounding embodied practices of *Pesach* and *Tu B'Av*. In contrast to Bottecher's stage directions inserted to mitigate the text's sensuality, these are stage directions that can be parsed from the actual pages of the *megillah*:

[348] Song of Songs 8:14, translation my own.
[349] Song of Songs 5:2, translation my own.
[350] Song of Songs 6:5, translation my own.

characters declaring what they are doing or implying what actions others are or were engaging in through their dialogue. In the case of the former, these can be parsed similarly to what one will find in classical or Early Modern plays in which characters describe their actions, speaking in present tense: like Oberon announcing his invisibility and intent to observe from the shadows in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*,[351] the Raaya declares that she has undergone all of the physical preparations for bed and is now asleep, though her heart remains on alert.[352] In Shakespeare's case, this present- and future-tense announcement stems from a playwriting tradition that did not yet include published stage directions; in the case of the *Megillot*, these are gifts of possibility made through linguistic similarities.

Other such gifts of potential stage directions can be drawn out of the exceptional verses that are unadorned with poetic language. Alter notes this in his analysis of *Shir HaShirim* as biblical poetry:

> Although the collection [*megillah*] as a whole makes elaborate and sometimes extravagant use of figurative language, when narrative governs a whole poem, as in 3:1-4 and 5:2-8, figuration is entirely displaced by the report of sequenced actions. There are no metaphors or similes in these six lines, and, similarly, in the description of the palanquin coming up from the desert to Jerusalem [earlier in the *megillah*], the only figurative language is "like a column of smoke" at the beginning (where the original reading may in fact have been "*in* columns of smoke") and "decked with love" at the end.[353]

Reframing Alter's analysis through the lens of performance, the fact that in both of these verse sequences the language is stripped down to basic descriptions of action causes it to stand out

[351] Shakespeare, William. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Edited by Sukanta Chaudhuri, The Arden Shakespeare, 2017, 2.1.186-7.
[352] Song of Songs 5:2-3.
[353] Alter, Robert. "The Garden of Metaphor." *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, Basic Books, 2011, 235.

from the heightened poetry of the majority of *Shir HaShirim* and opening the door for it to be reconfigured into guiding lines for movement and staging.

Beyond being merely dialogic and ripe with evocative language, much of the text of *Shir HaShirim* takes on a sort of youthful exuberance that infuses it with both thematic meaning and activated, motivated energy for the characters. This is a story told from the perspective of a heroine in the throes of spring-like young love, as evidenced by the muchness of the imagery: all is dramatically in excess. In the Raaya and Dod's lists of one another's physical attributes, their vertical descriptions of each other's bodies mix metaphors like mad. Neither is satisfied by sticking with one simile, a restless seeking driven further by the repeated "or" in some such lines noted by Robert Alter.[354] The Raaya repeatedly refers to the Dod as moving swiftly like a gazelle or a hart,[355] continuing this exuberant dissatisfaction with one point of comparison all the way through the closing line of the *megillah*. These mixed metaphors and repeated "ors" can communicate an in-the-moment excitement, an eager seeking of the right words of love as it overflows. The lovers are thereby engaging in a metaperformance as their energy overflows in their attempts to perform love correctly, to embody all that their hearts contain and their minds believe they are supposed to be in order to properly express this explosive feeling.[356]

Despite their endless pursuit of the proper performance of love, the lovers in *Shir HaShirim* are rarely preoccupied by the expectations of the society in which they live. The exception to this is the Raaya's lament that, as things currently stand, she cannot kiss the Dod on the street.[357] This exception helps highlight the rule: the love story of *Shir HaShirim* unfolds primarily in the heterotopic space of the natural/rural world, populated by their fellow young

[354] Alter, Robert. "The Garden of Metaphor." *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, Basic Books, 2011, 242-243.
[355] Song of Songs 2:9, 2:17, and 8:14.
[356] Alter, Robert. "The Garden of Metaphor." *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, Basic Books, 2011, 244.
[357] Song of Songs 8:1.

people (the Daughters of Jerusalem) who come to encourage their love. The young lovers can explore their desire in and through their pastoral setting, uninhibited by the social mores that would restrict their expression were they to meet somewhere like a city street.

This youthful, pastoral, unfettered heterotopia ties back to both *Pesach* and *Tu B'Av*, unified in this way by the carnivalesque. On *Pesach*, the freedom that is being celebrated is emphasized through the specificity of the ways one engages with the ritual meal. The *seder* includes four cups of wine (or grape juice) to be poured and drunk at particular moments throughout the retelling and singing. These cups, however, cannot be poured by the person who is going to drink them: instead, each person present pours for someone else, an act meant to mimic the luxury of having a cup-bearer, a role the enslaved Israelites might have played but from which they certainly did not benefit. While drinking these cups, participants in the *seder* are also instructed to lean in an imitation of wealthy banqueters reclining on couches (ideally this would happen throughout the *seder*, as is implied by the fourth of the Four Questions in which it is stated that tonight is exceptional because "we all are leaning," but modern seating tends to not lend itself to constant reclining). Both of these elements serve to highlight that those sitting around the *seder* table are free people, people with the ability to enjoy leisure and luxury and who are no longer living in subjugation (even if this is a temporary reprieve from contemporaneous persecution, as has been the case across much of Jewish history). In the *seder* moment, the celebrants are all equal in their enjoyment of the privileges of liberation. The carnivalesque plays its part in infusing unifying power into this combination of *megillah* and festivals, similar to *Esther* and *Rut*, as well as in contrast to the dark carnival of *Eicha*.

Like the reclining and pouring practices of *Pesach*, the rituals of *Tu B'Av* enable a temporary erasure of socio-economic signifiers and barriers. Before descending on the vineyards

to dance, the young women don borrowed white dresses: in this way, no one wears her family's wealth or poverty, and instead they all come together in a performance of equality. The young women cannot be judged based on their clothes: the dresses are known to not be their own, and they are all wearing the same color, so the expense of dyes is not a factor either. The unchaperoned matchmaking furthers this carnivalesque atmosphere, since this eliminates any negotiation of bride-price or dowry. These marriages can begin based purely on connection between the prospective spouses, not as economic or political transactions, and so no one's status back in the world of the city streets provides them with a privileged position in this pastoral festival. The carnivalesque aspects of *Shir HaShirim*, *Pesach*, and *Tu B'Av* are just that: they are temporary reprieves from social structures and strictures, performances of freedom and equality before the participants have to return to the more regulated and divided world of the everyday, but through engaging with these embodied practices, they have also been provided with a road map toward a more equal, unified, and free way of living.

Agusto Boal asserted the power of theatre as a means to not only reflect but also reform society for the better, placing the power of performance in the hands of the populace and breaking down the separation between actor and spectator. In giving the audience the agency of actors and making them collaborate, Boal hoped to unsettle the structure that allows those in power to wield theatre as a means to further entrench an unjust system. In the forum performance of Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, the hybrid "spect-actors" are encouraged to explore situations through which they can enact social change in the hopes that such performances will carry over into society beyond the stage. Engaging in Theatre of the Oppressed, according to Boal's theory, should prompt people to analyze and reflect upon the state of their reality, empower the disenfranchised, and catalyze political or social action.[358]

[358] Boal, Agusto. *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Theatre Communications Group, Tcg ed. edition. 01 January 1993.

Theatre of the Oppressed is an apt framework through which to look at these interconnected texts and practices: *Shir HaShirim*, *Pesach*, and *Tu B'Av* all share a thematic centering around deeply embodied liberation from oppressive and restrictive structures, systems, and settings. They focus on the ways in which actively connecting to the past can pave the way forward to a freer future. Applying Boal's ideas to the structures of the *seder*, *Mimouna*, *Tu B'Av* dancing, and the freed young love of *Shir HaShirim* allows them to serve as guides for the "spect-actors" to connect and reconnect with history and one another. With the freedom of choice granted in *Shir HaShirim* and *Tu B'Av* as well as the encouragement to question on *Pesach*, all of these instances also incorporate a performance of putting power into the hands of the young to shape their own futures, acts of empowerment that they can then carry into their lives across the rest of the calendar year.

Kol Eesha[359]

The songs and dances of *Tu B'Av*, in and of *Shir HaShirim*, and within the *Pesach* story as well as its re-enactment not only highlight the young in acts that place emphasis on freedom and futurity, but also empower another often disregarded group to seize the reins of their stories: women. *Tu B'Av* and *Shir HaShirim* both feature communities of women supporting one another in their pursuits of love. *Pesach* features multiple moments in the Exodus story in which a woman or women direct the flow of the narrative toward freedom, which is then celebrated by one of those instrumental women. Miriam, sister and childhood protector of Moshe, leads the newly-free Israelites from the awe and fear of the chase through the Reed Sea into a musical

[359] This phrase, literally "Voice of Woman," is used to refer to a set of much-debated and disagreed-upon traditions regarding the voices of women in song, but it also contains a pun via a homonym in which I also hear "Every Woman."

outpouring of joy in the form of the "Song of the Sea," or "*Shirat Miriam*,"[360] as Carol Myers explores in her article on Miriam's song through a feminist lens:

> [A close reading of the Song of the Sea itself as well as its Greek translation in the Septuigent], as well as the existence of a Dead Sea Scroll fragment attributing an extended song to Miriam, suggest that the Song of the Sea should really be attributed to Miriam. Indeed, the very presence of the beginning (that is, the title) of Miriam's song in the Masoretic Text indicates that the tradition of her authorship was so powerful that it could not be completely edited out, even as editors or redactors associated the entire poem with Moses to heighten his apotheosis.
>
> In sum, because only women played the *toph*,[361] all the biblical passages that mention performances involving drums *and* other instruments must denote ensembles that were either all female (as when dance, using ח.ו.ל, is also mentioned; see Psalms 149:3; 150:4) or were mixed gender. In the former case, when practicing together, women formed groups and provided opportunities for women leaders.
>
> The Song of the Sea is a prominent biblical example of a woman's performance genre. Its attribution to Miriam means that this powerful and perhaps earliest message about God's power used to save the people is given voice by a woman.[362]

It is important to note that this moment on the opposite shore of the Reed Sea, at last out of Egypt and liberated from slavery, has been cited by Jewish exegetes and biblical commentators as the transformation of the Israelites from a family into a people, empowered to make that transition by their embracing of their newfound freedom and shared faith that has just been

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[360] The Song of Miriam
[361] Timbrel
[362] Myers, Carol. "Miriam's Song of the Sea: A Women's Victory Performance." *TheTorah.com*, 2020, https://www.thetorah.com/article/miriams-song-of-the-sea-a-womens-victory-performance.

proven through miracles that will form the foundation of the ethno-religious identity. This moment is catalyzed by the song and dance of Miriam and the women who follow her, placing the unifying and transformative power in their hands. The origins of Jewish identity, it appears to me, thus lie in the exultant performance of women.

Therefore, when faced with a crisis of identity following the trauma of the first exile and the much less unified second exodus from the First Diaspora into the Second Temple Period, it would be natural for the Jewish people to turn once again to the song and dance of women to rediscover what it means to be one people free to live in their indigenous land. Like the symbol-rich *seder*, this aspect of *Shir HaShirim* offers a means of ceremonially reconnecting with and re-enacting the oft-cited origin point of the Jewish people. The pivotal points of the early history of the Jewish people are enfolded into the language, action, and potential for allegory of *Shir HaShirim*, as Paul Steinberg argues in his book on Jewish holy-days:

> Completely allegorical,[363] The Song of Songs describes a loving, intimate relationship between a male lover, in effect God, and a female lover, in effect the People of Israel. Because of this passionate portrayal…Rabbi Akiva, the great scholar of the Mishnah, who lived in 1st- to 2nd-century Israel, deemed it the holiest book in the Kethuvim [*Writings*]…Rabbis in subsequent generations inferred from the title a further reason for the book's importance. Because the title is The Song (singular) of Songs (plural), the seven-chapter poem is thought to be a summary of all the "songs" — the moments when God spoke to Israel, for example, at the splitting of the Red [*sic*] Sea and at Mount Sinai…Jewish mysticism, which holds The Song of Songs in a particular place of

[363] A strong assertion from Steinberg

> importance, considers the book to be one that rings out from the heavens at the most holy and joyous moments in history.[364]

In this way, I position *Shir HaShirim* as an inverse of *Eicha*: *Shir HaShirim* becomes a collection of stacking joys that reaffirm what it means to be a liberated Jewish people, told through the songs of women.

Shir HaShirim is, indisputably, a woman's song, not just through its function as palimpsest for *Tu B'Av*, but in the configuration of the text. The proportion of the text allocated to each of the lovers clearly establishes the Raaya as the protagonist and narrator. She has the bulk of the speeches and controls the majority of the narrative.[365] Not only is she dominant, but, more than any other woman in the Jewish biblical canon, this is her story – even more than Esther and Rut, the only female figures after whom biblical books are named, who both seize control of their stories partway through. The Raaya moves from a longing lover to an active paramour: her journey is not only toward union with the Dod, but to self-realization and independence. She takes ownership of her vineyards, previously neglected because she was forced to care for those of her brothers, and revels in them. She is no longer grieved by the Dod spending time with his fellow shepherds, but rather they listen to her voice. She has found her place among her lover's friends and her own, urged on by the Daughter of Jerusalem rather than

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[364] Steinberg, Paul. "The Passover Love Story." *Celebrating the Jewish Year: The Spring and Summer Holidays*, edited by Janet Greenstein Potter, The Jewish Publication Society, 2009, 47.

[365] For a breakdown of the numbers, see Bamberger, Binyamin, Chaim Katz, Yitzchak Greenblatt, et al. "Shir Hashirim: Deeper Meaning of Shir Hashirim, The Song of Songs." *Yeshiva: The Torah World Gateway*, 2010, https://www.yeshiva.co/midrash/13477. Excerpt of their calculations here: In the first three chapters, the woman ("hara'aya") is dominant. She initiates and closes each dialogue. Her speeches are longer than those of the man, and include reference to more outside elements (e.g. daughters of Jerusalem, King Shlomo). In chapter two, she presents her beloved's response ("My beloved replied…" 2;10), and chapter three is entirely hers. Chapter four and one verse of chapter five belong to the man ("hadod"). The remainder of chapter five is the ra'aya. (The chapter break, of course, seems to more properly belong after verse 1.) The next three chapters contain speeches and responses of both lovers, the ra'aya becoming more dominant in each, until the last (chapter eight) is again almost completely hers.

begging them.[366] The Raaya finds love and community, and love in community, as well as an appreciation for the beauty and bounties of her homeland. If the Raaya is a stand-in for the people of Israel, through the allegorical or theomorphic interpretations of the text, then *Shir HaShirim* is a guide for collective self-realization, for the Jewish people to find or rediscover their unified identity.

Locating the Body, Loving on the Land

Beyond the allegorical reading, the Raaya serves as keeper and lover of the land. The landscape of Israel is transposed onto her body, that of the Dod, and their combined bodies in consummation in/through the garden, as Alter explains: "...the lover is entirely assimilated into the natural world at the same time that the natural world is felt to be profoundly in consonance with the lovers."[367] The Raaya and her love become a symbol of futurity through the connection to *Tu B'Av* (she is keeper of a vineyard, after all) and to *Pesach*, as well as inside the text through the very erotic nature of it that caused centuries of scandal. The consummation of the Raaya and the Dod's love in their blossoming garden and their romp in the lush wilderness reflect a promise that the Jewish people will continue and continue to be connected to their indigenous land.

The *Tu B'Av* festival had a deep attachment to a physical space in ancient Israel but, unlike *Pesach*, was not successfully transposed into a diasporic practice possible in any space in which Jews found themselves for a few potential reasons. *Pesach* is about a return, so it makes sense to take it into the Diaspora, transformed into not only a celebration of a past return, but a symbol of hope for a future return and reunification. *Shir HaShirim* leaves us only with an idealized moment of *Tu B'Av*, of freed love and a perfect landscape, though it also contains

[366] There is a fascinating article debating the allegorical reading of *Shir HaShirim* in which the Raaya's arc is considered. It was written collaboratively by multiple rabbis and can be found here: https://www.yeshiva.co/midrash/13477

[367] Alter, Robert. "The Garden of Metaphor." *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, Basic Books, 2011, 243.

within it a warning against idealization in the form of the Raaya's two different experiences with city watchmen:

> מְצָאוּנִי הַשֹּׁמְרִים הַסֹּבְבִים בָּעִיר אֵת שֶׁאָהֲבָה נַפְשִׁי רְאִיתֶם
>
> /The guards who walked through the city found me; I asked if they had seen the love of my soul
>
> כִּמְעַט שֶׁעָבַרְתִּי מֵהֶם עַד שֶׁמָּצָאתִי אֵת שֶׁאָהֲבָה נַפְשִׁי אֲחַזְתִּיהוּ וְלֹא אַרְפֶּנּוּ עַד־שֶׁהֲבִיאתִיהוּ אֶל־בֵּית אִמִּי וְאֶל־חֶדֶר הוֹרָתִי
>
> /Almost as soon as I passed them, I found the love of my soul; I held him tightly and did not let go until I brought him to my mother's house and to the room of the one who had borne me.[368]

and

> מְצָאֻנִי הַשֹּׁמְרִים הַסֹּבְבִים בָּעִיר הִכּוּנִי פְצָעוּנִי נָשְׂאוּ אֶת־רְדִידִי מֵעָלַי שֹׁמְרֵי הַחֹמוֹת
>
> /The guards who walked through the city found me; they hit me, bruised me, stripped me of my veil, these guards of the walls.[369]

The first seems idealized, imagined, in especially heightened and unrealistic language. It is preceded by the Raaya describing herself falling asleep and dreaming of the Dod; thus, the easy interaction with the guards can be framed as a dream, an idealization that is further shown in the serendipitous immediacy of the Raaya finding her beloved and bringing him home to her mother. Taking her intended home would symbolize a sealing of their union, taking it from the liberated pastoral space into the reality of marriage that has been acknowledged by the family of the bride. This act of homecoming does not appear to have occurred in the remainder of the narrative, as is supported by the Raaya's wish to be able to openly kiss the Dod in public and other instances of

[368] Song of Songs 2:3-4, translation my own.
[369] Song of Songs 5:7, translation my own.

her wishing to bring him home to her mother. The second interaction with the guards is harsher and more grounded. The Raaya prefaces it with a description of getting out of bed, leaving the easy world of freedom in gardens and dreams and venturing into the cold world of the city. This traumatic incident, or, at least, its recounting, is followed by the Raaya turning to the Daughters of Jerusalem, who prompt her to remember the joys of her love and promise to help her in her happy pursuit of it.[370]

Ultimately, like *Pesach*, *Shir HaShirim* conveys a need for both idealistic, excited hope and grounded, visceral understanding of real suffering both past and potential. In her analysis of the importance of Khmer dance, Judith Hamera reflects on the significance to diasporic communities of the collapse of time facilitated by performance:

> This confluence of antiquity and utopia is particularly magnified for the refugee or the exile, who faces:
>
> > two types of immanent [*sic*] and imminent threats simultaneously: the threat of the disappearance of the homeland and the threat of themselves disappearing in the host society. Fetishization [as a strategy for negotiating these threats...] entails condensing all the meanings of home [...] into substitute fetishes and frozen stereotypes. (Naficy I993:I29)
>
> …the net result of this fetishization of past and future is that "[t]hrough controlling 'there' and 'then,' the exile can control 'here' and 'now.'"[371]

This conception is absolutely apt for analyzing the function of *Pesach* and *Shir HaShirim* as a festival-text combination reshaped to serve a diasporic people struggling to find and maintain a sense of self as well as one of hope. *Pesach* and *Shir HaShirim* do not present the past as perfect

[370] Song of Songs 5:8-6:1.
[371] Hamera, Judith. "An Answerability of Memory: 'Saving' Khmer Classical Dance." *TDR (1988-)* 46, no. 4, 2002, 75.

nor the future as a promise of perfection; rather, they emphasize the importance of continuity as well as the communal work necessary in the present to move from a difficult past into a brighter future.

Due to the palimpsestic nature of the *megillah*, engaging with *Shir HaShirim* and *Pesach* practices through a performance lens can also be a form of "cultural revitalization as decolonizing praxis,"[372] like the Wiyot people dancing on their indigenous land again. In 1860, the Wiyot people were massacred by colonizers in California in Humboldt County. 150 years later, in 2014, the descendants of those who survived that massacre came together to dance their world renewal ceremony on their indigenous land. This act of communal, land-based performance served as an act of healing and reclamation, an answer to centuries of trauma but not an erasure of it.[373] Like the revival of the Wiyot world renewal ceremony, an adaptation of *Shir HaShirim* as a performed, fully embodied piece does not mean reviving exactly what once was and has been lost; rather, it would allow Jewish communities to engage with the layers of the palimpsest, bringing the dances of the women by the Reed Sea and in the vineyards of Shiloh back into our bodies in some form, even on our indigenous land, retracing the dancing steps of women who came before us. This also dovetails with the current exploration of reviving *Tu B'Av* in Israel, particularly in rural communities, in which *Tu B'Av* is positioned as the inverse of *Tisha B'Av*, with the latter mourning loss of sovereignty and the former celebrating the regaining of it.[374]

The combination of *Shir HaShirim*, *Pesach*, and *Tu B'Av* with the Raaya's layered journey provides the roadmap to freedom, unity, and connection to indigenous land, to building

[372] Risling Baldy. "California Indian History and Native Women." *We Are Dancing for You*, University of Washington press, 2018, 52.
[373] Ibid. 51-52.
[374] Steinberg, Paul. "Tu b'Av: Coming Back to Life." *Celebrating the Jewish Year: The Spring and Summer Holidays*, edited by Janet Greenstein Potter, The Jewish Publication Society, 2009, 210.

toward a future based in community and appreciation for the joys there are in an effort to heal from the traumas that were. The Raaya is ultimate "Maiden" of the three figures who fit this archetype across the *Megillot*, as the youngest and the only one who remains (ostensibly) unmarried throughout her narrative, and thus is the one who most stands on the precipice of her future, most of her life still ahead of her as she determines how she wants it to look. She is a symbol of hope that the best can be yet to come, if only we learn to shed the strictures that separate us (like tribal or diasporic regional distinctions) and join in a dance that allows us to share the burden of past pains.

Rut:

Love, Laughter, and Legacy

"The woman of valor…outshines them all."[375] So asserts the biblical poem "*Eshet Khayil*/Woman of Valor," an acrostic at the end of the book of *Mishlei*, typically attributed to King Shlomo. The poem enumerates the qualities of a woman one should seek, the ideal. Among her traits are wisdom, compassion, a giving nature, and respect from the elders who sit at the city gates. If one has encountered *Megillat Rut*, these traits might sound familiar, and the text repeatedly implicitly confirms the connection.

Though *Rut* has been read as a text with an oral origin in the past, I posit that it is both impossible to definitively determine its history based on the evidence presented by previous champions of that argument and important to examine the ways in which the structure and features of the text led them to their conclusions in order to parse the performance possibilities in *Rut*. I believe that it is crucial to place *Rut* in both historical and cultural context in order to truly read into its potential power when reframed through the lens of performance. *Rut* and the holiday on which it is read, *Shavuot*, are intrinsically about embodiment and together highlight the importance in post-First Diaspora Judaism of opting-in in order to form and maintain communal identity. Breaking down the structure of *Rut* as well as the many performances within the story itself, unpacking immersive *Shavuot* practices, and sifting through the many layers of context in which this *megillah* and festival pairing exists helps to connect the thematic dots that point to the significance of embodied opting-in.

In this chapter, I explore the theatricality of the naming conventions and speaking styles of the characters within *Rut*. I then break down the possibilities for a chorus and movement that emerge from reconfiguring *Rut* as an embodied text, followed by an analysis of Rut's own

[375] Proverbs 31:10-29. Translation is my own from the biblical Hebrew.

performances of (desired) identity and the relevance of the layered historical context of *Rut*. I transition from there into an examination of *Shavuot* and the themes of *Rut* and its host festival, their function as a roadmap for "opting-in" to Jewish community.

Of the *megillot*, *Rut* is structurally closest to *Esther*: it, too, presents a linear narrative with a clear arc of action, wrapped up with a sort of zooming out to the broader implications of this individual story for Jewish history and culture. The *megillah* primarily follows two women, Naomi and Rut, as their shared fortunes rise, fall, and rise again better than before. Naomi is introduced as the wife of Elimelekh, a wealthy Israelite man from the area of Beit Lekhem who takes his family to the neighboring country of Moav[376] when famine strikes Israel. While living in Moav, Naomi and Elimelekh's two sons marry two Moabite women, Orpah and Rut. The sons, Makhlon[377] and Khilyon,[378] appear only in this sort of prologue, as their names might imply. At some point after these marriages, Elimelekh dies. The remainder of the family stays in Moav for another ten years, at which point the promise of the sons' names is delivered: Makhlon and Khilyon sicken, weaken, and die.

The family now consists of three widows who share no blood, the daughters-in-law further distanced from their mother-in-law by their different ethnic backgrounds. With nothing tying her to Moav and the famine in Israel over, Naomi sets off to return to her homeland. At first, both Orpah and Rut follow her, but Naomi urges them to stay in Moav, go back to their families, and remarry, arguing that she has nothing left to offer them. Though briefly hesitant, Orpah ultimately follows Naomi's advice and takes leave of both her mother-in-law and the narrative. Rut, however, stays. Naomi continues to argue with her, but Rut shuts her down with the line that would become iconic:

[376] Anglicized as Moab
[377] Which means "weak"
[378] Which means "sick" or "sickly"

אַל־תִּפְגְּעִי־בִי לְעָזְבֵךְ לָשׁוּב מֵאַחֲרָיִךְ כִּי אֶל־אֲשֶׁר תֵּלְכִי אֵלֵךְ וּבַאֲשֶׁר תָּלִינִי אָלִין עַמֵּךְ עַמִּי וֵאלֹהַיִךְ אֱלֹהָי

/Don't push me to abandon you, to turn back and leave you behind.

Wherever you go, I'll go.

Wherever you stay, I'll stay.

Your nation is my nation.

Your God is my God.

בַּאֲשֶׁר תָּמוּתִי אָמוּת וְשָׁם אֶקָּבֵר כֹּה יַעֲשֶׂה יְהוָה לִי וְכֹה יוֹסִיף כִּי הַמָּוֶת יַפְרִיד בֵּינִי וּבֵינֵךְ

/Wherever you die, I'll die,

And there I will be buried.

Let this be the will of God:

I swear that nothing but death will separate you and me.[379]

Naomi accepts this proffered oath, and the two widowed women journey the rest of the way together to Beit Lekhem.

The return of Naomi after at least a decade shocks the populace: the women of Beit Lekhem cannot believe that this bereft woman is the once-wealthy Naomi. Naomi feels the same alienation from her past self, declaring that she should henceforward be called "Mara," meaning "bitter" or "the bitter one." Notably, no one calls her this for the rest of the *megillah*, including the narration. Her station has, indeed, become far more bitter than it was when she initially left for Moav. Having no source of income, Rut takes it upon herself to go to the barley fields to glean what was dropped by the official workers of each field – this is in line with ancient Jewish law of *Shikhekha*, which dictated that any parts of a harvest that are dropped should be left for the poor.[380]

[379] Ruth 1:16-17, translation my own.
[380] Leviticus 19:10 and 23:22

Rut ends up gleaning in the fields owned by a man named Boaz, who is introduced as Naomi's kinsman through Elimelekh and a "man of valor."[381] He spots Rut and is struck by her, a fascination that is further deepened when he finds out who she is. He tells her to keep coming to his fields, that he will ensure that she is protected and has access to water while she works. Boaz explains that he knows what she did for Naomi, and he blesses her for it. Rut does as he instructed and, at his invitation, even joins him and his workers for their meal, the remainder of which Boaz then wraps up for her to take back to Naomi.

Naomi is astounded by the bounty Rut brings home. When Rut explains how she came into possession of so much food and fallen stalks of barley, Naomi deduces that there might be more at play here than simple kindness, and so she hatches a plan. Once the barley and wheat harvests are over, Naomi shared her scheme with Rut. Boaz is what is called a "גֹּאֵל,"[382] eligible to resolve the widows' woes through Levirate Marriage. In an effort to nudge him toward this course of action, Naomi tells Rut to bathe, anoint herself with fragrant oils, dress up nicely, and go find Boaz on the threshing floor. Rut does as her mother-in-law says.

She finds Boaz alone and asleep on the threshing floor, exhausted from work and a good meal. Here the text enters the realm of possible double entendre: Rut lifts the blanket covering Boaz and uncovers either his legs/feet or his penis, the word for the former being a contemporaneous innuendo for the latter. Whatever body part was uncovered, it is enough to wake Boaz, who is understandably startled to find a strange woman in his makeshift bed. His surprise seems to turn to pleasure when Rut reveals her identity: she tells him to wrap his robe around her, and he does as she says. He sings her praises again, evidently very much on board with the idea of marrying her; however, he points out a problem in the form of another relative of

[381] Ruth 2:1
[382] Best translated in this context to "redeemer."

Elimelkh's who is more closely related than Boaz and thus first in line in terms of Levirate Marriage. Together, the potential couple discuss the situation and devise a plan. Rut stays the night and sneaks back home under the cover of dawn's haze. Before she leaves, Boaz fills her shawl with yet more grain, which leads to Naomi either jokingly or genuinely not recognizing the strange form at her door in the morning and then, once again, understanding the implications of this generous gift.

The next day, true to his word, Boaz goes to the gates of the city where the "elders"[383] sit, and he seeks out the problem-posing other relative of Elimelekh. This man's name is never revealed in the text: he is referred to only as "פְּלֹנִי אַלְמֹנִי/Ploni Almoni."[384] Boaz tells Ploni Almoni that the latter man is eligible to get some of Elimelekh's land from Naomi, a prospect that interests Ploni Almoni at first. He changes his mind, however, when Boaz adds that the land comes with marriage to Rut the Moabite and all that Levirate Marriage entails. Ploni Almoni renounces his role as redeemer and passes it down the bloodline to Boaz. The way now cleared, Rut and Boaz marry and have a son. Naomi is enraptured with her spiritual grandchild and becomes a sort of second mother to him, as the women of Beit Lekhem note. The *megillah* ends with a double recitation of the descendants of Rut and Boaz.

This narrative of resilience, romance, and Rut's unflagging loyalty leaps off the page and, in that way, already lends itself to theatricalization. The text that conveys the narrative deepens this potential, as has been noted by scholars such as the theatre and theology team of Terry Giles and William J. Doan in their analysis and translation of *Rut*.[385] Giles and Doan employ the analytical parameters of Werner Kelber and Frank H. Polak, both of whom lay out hallmarks of

[383] This does not mean literally the oldest denizens of Beit Lekhem, but rather the wise ones, the leaders.
[384] The Hebrew/Aramaic equivalent of "Joe Schmo"
[385] Doan, William J. and Terry Giles. *The Story of Naomi-The Book of Ruth: From Gender to Politics*. Biblical Performance Criticism, Volume 13, 29 January 26.

texts with oral pasts. Kelber lists scenic duality, focus on individuals, and dialogue with give and take as central features of texts that have embodied legacies.[386] *Rut* ticks all of those boxes with Rut and Naomi serving as deuteragonists on whom the plot consistently centers, with Boaz joining as a romantic interest whose individuality is also given space to develop, and "the highest ratio of dialogue to narration of any biblical book"[387] through which characters disagree, direct, and change one another. Turning to Polak's list of qualities of an oral text, Giles and Doan note in *Rut*'s text language that is less formal, the presence of paratactic constructions as well as more pronomials and deictics, a tendency toward sentences with fewer constituents, and rarity of longer noun phrases.[388]

Giles and Doan's goal is to prove a performance-based past for *Megillat Rut*, which is compelling but cannot be established as a historical truth; however, their literary analysis is useful in supporting the possibility of future performances of the text as well. Their gloss pairs well with that of Shimon Levy, Jewish Bible and theatre scholar and, fittingly, author of *The Bible as Theatre*. In that book, Levy asserts the inherent theatricality of *Rut* and the public reading on *Shavuot* as a sort of stepping stone to performance, though he relegates the connection to "a strictly religious context" and does not delve into the potential power of the rituals surrounding the reading and those included in the reading itself.[389]

The Act of Naming

Levy sees in the story of *Rut* a thoroughly theatrical tale in both form and content, down to the very names of the characters contained within it.[390] The naming conventions in *Rut* are

[386] Doan, William J. and Terry Giles. *The Story of Naomi-The Book of Ruth: From Gender to Politics*. Biblical Performance Criticism, Volume 13, 29 January 26, 66-67.
[387] Doan, William J. and Terry Giles. *The Story of Naomi-The Book of Ruth: From Gender to Politics*. Biblical Performance Criticism, Volume 13, 29 January 26, 67.
[388] Doan, William J. and Terry Giles. *The Story of Naomi-The Book of Ruth: From Gender to Politics*. Biblical Performance Criticism, Volume 13, 29 January 26, 69.
[389] Levy, Shimon. "Ruth: the Shrew-ing of the Tame." *The Bible as Theatre*. Sussex Academic Press, 2000, 83.
[390] Levy, Shimon. "Ruth: the Shrew-ing of the Tame." *The Bible as Theatre*. Sussex Academic Press, 2000, 86.

doing storytelling work: they are speech-acts of sorts in and of themselves that can also serve as a series of Chekhov's Guns, dramatic irony for the audience as well as a tool the characters acknowledge within the story as having the power to (re)shape their destinies if they do recognize the device from the inside. Makhlon and Khilyon were never going to live past the prologue with names that doom them to sickness and death. Orpah's choice to adhere to Naomi's instructions to turn away is hinted at in her name, too, as Nehama Ashkenasy notes: "Orpah's synecdochic name is also a play on words, suggestive of עֹרֶף (oref), meaning the "back of the neck," which Orpah shows her mother-in-law when she turns to go back home (1:14)."[391] The wheel of Naomi's fortune turning back to positivity by the end of the story is belied by both her name and the chorus's refusal to obey her order to change it from "pleasant" to "bitter." Rut and Boaz are heroic even in their names: "friendship" and "in strength."

The union of friendship in strength is suggested from the characters' matching epithets: Boaz is first introduced as a "אִישׁ גִּבּוֹר חַיִל/man of strong valor."[392] Boaz echoes this language back at Rut later, referring to Rut as an "אֵשֶׁת חַיִל/woman of valor"[393] when he promises to pursue the role of her redeemer in Levirate Marriage. True to the Rule of Three, one more variation of the phrase appears toward the end of the *megillah*: when the people of Beit Lekhem bless the newly-confirmed forthcoming nuptials of Rut and Boaz, they bless the couple by wishing that they "עֲשֵׂה־חַיִל/be valiant"[394] together as they build their home and make their name in the city, a name that comes prepared with their shared epithet.

Other epithets are engaged across the text, these titles taking part in telling the story. The characters perform and are enacted by others through the ways in which they are addressed and

[391] Aschkenasy, Nehama. "The Book of Ruth: A Serious Comedy" *TheTorah.com*, 2023,.https://thetorah.com/article/the-book-of-ruth-a-serious-comedy.
[392] Ruth 2:1, translation my own.
[393] Ruth 3:11, translation my own.
[394] Ruth 4:11, translation my own – literally "do valor."

to which they are referred: in a world in which the social construct of reputation is a major force, the personages are shaped by the ways in which they are perceived and how they project or manipulate the perceptions of others on themselves. Alan Sinfield explains Iago's power in *Othello* through what he dubs the "conditions of plausibility,"[395] contextually-informed factors that determine what stories a given audience will believe. In this *megillah* of layered storytelling, the epithets in *Rut* play on the "conditions of plausibility" for those hearing them both within *Rut* and outside of it.

The clearest example of exchanging a name for a descriptor is in the case of the alternate "redeemer," known only as "Ploni Almoni," for which the closest English translation would be something akin to "Joe Schmoe" as both a substitute name for a nonentity and a comical rhyme of nonsense. In this instance, the phrase serves not only as a character name, but also a metaphor for one who opts out of the onus of taking part in the story/community by passing off his redeemer role. Though that opting-out ultimately serves the central love story, Ploni Almoni's actions represent a form of reneging on communal responsibility and hints at prejudice when his rejection comes only after he is informed he will be responsible for Rut the Moabitess and Naomi. He takes himself out of the spot of shared responsibility and is repaid by with his name being left out of the story.

Rut's journey from the fringes to the center of Beit Lekhem society and Jewish self-mythologizing is made possible through her navigation of naming conventions: she is referred to by at least nine different names, titles, and epithets.[396] She not only plays each part in such a way that enables her to align with expectations and exceed them in order to move to the next categorization, but also picks up the power of these conventions to transform herself.

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[395] Sinfield, Alan. "Cultural Materialism, *Othello*, and the Politics of Plausibility." *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading*, University of California Press, 28 September 1992, 30.
[396] Levy, Shimon. "Ruth: the Shrew-ing of the Tame." *The Bible as Theatre*. Sussex Academic Press, 2000, 101.

Through the shifting ways in which she refers to herself, particularly when addressing Boaz, Rut reconfigures her own identity in his eyes, as Levy notes: "It is a truthful, though diplomatically brilliant way of self re/presentation under the circumstances."[397]

Telltale Speaking Styles

Beyond the names, the narrative is bookended by speech acts: Rut's oath and Boaz's declaration. In his work on speech acts, John Searle breaks down the way in which a promise must be proffered in order for it to function as and to be considered a speech act in itself. Both Rut's and Boaz's promises follow Searle's "rules for promising,"[398] as I outline below:

1. Propositional-content: The promise is to be uttered only in the context of a sentence/larger discourse, the utterance of which predicates the future act of the speaker. Both Rut and Boaz utter their promises in the context of a larger conversation with the person to whom they are swearing an oath, predicating their future actions (Rut's accompanying and caring for Naomi, Boaz's caring and fighting for Rut).
2. Preparatory rule 1: The promise is to be uttered only if the receiving party would prefer the speaker's doing said action to their not doing it, and the speaker believes that to be the case. Naomi and Rut, respectively, would prefer that the promisers go through with those promised actions.
3. Preparatory rule 2: The speaker and recipient of the promise do not think the former would take that action anyway. None of the concerned parties in *Rut* believe the actors would simply engage in those actions regardless.

[397] Levy, Shimon. "Ruth: the Shrew-ing of the Tame." *The Bible as Theatre*. Sussex Academic Press, 2000, 101.
[398] Searle, John R. "What Is a Speech Act?" *Critical Theory Since 1965*. Edited by Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle, University Presses of Florida, 1985, 69.

4. Sincerity rule: The promise is to be uttered only if the speaker intends to do the action in question. Rut and Boaz both truly intend to go through on their promises (as is evidenced by both, indeed, doing so at the first and every subsequent opportunity following their promises).
5. Essential rule: The utterance of the promise counts as the undertaking by the speaker to do that action. The utterance of these declarations count as Rut and Boaz undertaking the promised actions.

Furthermore, I would position Rut's vow as at once speech act, character-defining monologue, and performed poem. As she promises to be Naomi's family and unswerving companion, Rut becomes both with no further argument from Naomi. Henceforward, they are a united team who take care of each other. Rut's determination, loyalty, readiness to act, and understanding of how to say and do what will most connect her to her scene partner are all displayed in this single speech, elevated by the lyricism of the phraseology. In her article "Elements of Style," playwright Suzan-Lori Parks introduces her technique of "repetition and revision" (or rep & rev). Inspired by jazz music, Parks proposes the power of repeating words and phrases with alterations for greater impact. This comes from a polemic about contemporary theatre, an essay in which Parks is making an argument about what theatre should do – and that theatre should always do something. Recognizable rep & rev in *Rut* resonates with the *megillah* operating as a potentially performed text with a multifaceted communal function, a piece that can be theatricalized to do something. Rut's vow is a clear example of the poetic and playwriting tools that make *Rut* an ideal contender for theatrical reframing for a purpose. The lines of the vow combine Alter's parallel structures[399] and Suzan-Lori Parks's rep & rev, each foot of the

[399] Alter, Robert. "The Dynamics of Parallelism." *The Art of Biblical Poetry*. Basic Books, 2011, 20.

speech taking a phrase about Naomi and turning it inward to Rut, sharpening their transformative impact in doing so.

Rut's engagement with parallel structures and rep and rev[400] are not relegated to internal reflections of her own words; she also exhibits the ability to reflect others' words back at them in her metaperformance as she forges her path forward and quietly, cleverly pushes for her place among the Jewish people. She demonstrates this skill in her first formative speeches to each of her primary scene and life partners, Naomi and Boaz.[401] After Orpah listens to Naomi and leaves the party going to Beit Lekhem, the bereft mother-in-law turns to Rut and urges her to follow suit, to do as Orpah did by going back "אֶל־עַמָּהּ וְאֶל־אֱלֹהֶיהָ שׁוּבִי אַחֲרֵי יְבִמְתֵּךְ/to her people and to her gods; turn away after your sister-in-law."[402] Instead of obeying Naomi's words, Rut turns them back around and integrates them into her speech, opening with the flipped phrase "אַל־תִּפְגְּעִי־בִי לְעָזְבֵךְ לָשׁוּב מֵאַחֲרָיִךְ/Do not push me to abandon you, **to turn away from you**."[403] In doing so, Rut emphasizes the shift in her allegiance to Naomi over her fellow Moabites (like Orpah), and drives this home with the further flipping of "her people" to "your people" and "her gods" to "your god." She does the same thing with Boaz, taking his blessing from their first interaction that she be protected by "God's wings"[404] and requesting Boaz take her "under [his] wings" in the pivotal threshing floor scene.[405] This device not only displays Rut's incisiveness and ability to adapt to connect with the people with whom she is interacting, but it also conveys a deeply responsive, reactive type of dialogue: these characters are listening to each other, actively engaging linguistically in a poetic back-and-forth.

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[400] Parks, Suzan-Lori. "From Elements of Style." *The America Play and Other Works*, Theatre Communications Group, 1 November 1994, 10.
[401] Levy, Shimon. "Ruth: the Shrew-ing of the Tame." *The Bible as Theatre*. Sussex Academic Press, 2000, 88 and 91-92.
[402] Ruth 1:15, translation my own.
[403] Ruth 1:16, translation my own.
[404] Ruth 2:12, translation my own.
[405] Ruth 3:9, translation my own.

The dialogic-driven momentum of the text is further fueled by the fact that Rut is not the only character in the *megillah* with a distinct style of speech. Boaz and Naomi each has their own unique voice, making their spoken lines jump out as belonging to separate speakers rather than a single narrator and the book of *Rut* more definitively dialogic in nature than even *Esther*.[406] Boaz, the paradigm of responsible patriarchy, is given a voice that serves as a double-edged sword. He is a respected member of Beit Lekhem society, a wealthy landowner, and a "strong man of valor"[407] (which could imply a history of military prowess or simply suggest his upstanding nature). His lines reflect this: he uses vaulting, formal language, employing phrases like "תְּהִי מַשְׂכֻּרְתֵּךְ שְׁלֵמָה מֵעִם יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר־בָּאת לַחֲסוֹת תַּחַת־כְּנָפָיו/May your reward be complete from Hashem, God of Israel, as you have come to seek refuge under the wings of the Lord!"[408] and "הֲלֹוא צִוִּיתִי/For I have commanded."[409] The former borrows a phrase from liturgy, the lofty language of prayer and praise to God, as far back as the *Tehillim*. The latter utilizes a word that appears at least 64 times in the Hebrew biblical canon; the plurality of times "צִוִּיתִי/I have commanded" is used, it is the language of God, either direct or through the mouths of prophets. Boaz is using elevated language, indeed!

Boaz's speaking style, however, does not solely serve to raise him up: it makes him sound out of place in the otherwise easy dialogue of *Rut*. He becomes a comic caricature of a wealthy older man, especially when he is seen trying to show off for the beautiful woman who has flattered his ego. Boaz's exceedingly elevated speech calls to mind archetypal characters from ancient and Early Modern comedy such as the *senex*[410] and *Il Capitano*. Where Rut is adaptable and easily flows from one speaking style to another depending on her conversation partner

[406] Alter, Robert. *The Art of the Biblical Narrative*. Basic Books, 2011, 338-39.
[407] Ruth 2:1, translation my own.
[408] Ruth 2:12, translation my own.
[409] Ruth 2:9, translation my own.
[410] Aschkenasy, Nehama. "Reading Ruth through a Bakhtinian Lens: The Carnivalesque in a Biblical Tale." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126, no. 3, 2007, 446.

(including this heightened style, which takes on a flirtatious tinge in her turns of his phrasing),[411] Boaz is stuck in the equivalent of Shakespearean English, spitting out different iterations of stock phrases. Nehama Ashkenasy expands on the impact of this stilted speaking style:

> The old man sounds like a puppet repeating familiar formulae, rather than expressing his own original sentiments. This renders him mechanical, robotic, and therefore comical in the Bergsonian sense.[412]

Taking this a step further than Ashkenasy, I argue that by speaking so grandly, Boaz actually emphasizes his own secondary status in the story: he is an instrument of Rut and Naomi's narrative arc, all of his actions orchestrated by these women behind the scenes in a subversion of patriarchal expectations that were growing increasingly normative in the Mediterranean Basin of the Second Temple Period. Boaz's speech enacts his own turn to the topsy turvy.

Naomi, on the other hand, displays a hyper-awareness in her speech. She is a storyteller within the story from her very first lines, the first dialogue in the entire *megillah*, in which she delivers instructions to Rut and Orpah to turn back with her and God's blessing.[413] Through this line, she gives clear directions to her fellow characters and gives them permission to leave the story, to conclude the chapter of their lives that they spent with Naomi and exit the narrative as minor heroes while she presses forward in her tragedy. This kicks off a pattern of taking some amount of control over her story and recognition that she inhabits a world that is ruled by literary conventions. Naomi is the only character in the text who appears to be aware of the function of names: perceiving her story to be a tragedy, she argues to shed her given name and its implications of a pleasant life and to instead adopt the moniker "Mara" to reflect the bittering of

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[411] Ibid. 446.
[412] Aschkenasy, Nehama. "Reading Ruth through a Bakhtinian Lens: The Carnivalesque in a Biblical Tale." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126, no. 3, 2007, 446.
[413] Ruth 1:8.

her narrative after her fall from wealthy wife and mother to poor widow who has lost her children.[414]

When it appears that the chorus itself rejects Naomi's tragic rebranding, Naomi pivots and turns her storytelling power toward reshaping the narrative into a romance, recasting herself as the wise woman advising the heroine. It is implied that she knows about Boaz from jump,[415] and seems to merely tacitly support Rut's choices to go and glean from the fields to help the pair survive. That is, until Rut returns with extra grain and food, and Naomi moves from passive to active, returning to the language of divine ordination that she used to try to redirect Rut and Orpah out of the narrative to now push Rut and Boaz together. She still bides her time, not rushing the romantic arc, but instructs Rut to stick to Boaz's fields, justifying her narrative puppeteering with God's will and safety concerns that she had not expressed when Rut initially set out to unspecified fields.[416]

When the harvest season comes to an end, Naomi hands down her most detailed instructions to Rut, organizing the threshing floor scene from behind the curtain. Like Esther does on her own, Naomi has Rut bathe, anoint herself with oils, put on her best robes, and seek out Boaz under cover of darkness, walking her daughter-in-law through every step of this dance of seduction up until the point that Boaz will have to make a decision about the beautiful woman who has found him alone, woken him up, and uncovered his "feet."[417] Naomi does not explicitly say so, but her instructions not only orchestrate Rut's movements, but also force Boaz into a corner, deciding for them all that the will-they/won't they of the harvest season is over and it is time for the lovers to come together. Boaz recognizes Rut's vulnerability in the situation Naomi

[414] Ruth. 1:20.
[415] Ruth 2:1.
[416] Ruth 2:20-22.
[417] Ruth 3:3-4.

set up, not only emotionally but in terms of her reputation, as he implies in his advice to her to leave before dawn has fully broken (but not before the pair have spent the night together).[418] Recognizing both the opportunity and the suggestions of mutual affection from the actions of the would-be couple, Naomi has made Rut and Boaz's moves for them.

Once Rut returns and reports how Boaz responded, Naomi urges Rut to join her in sitting back and waiting for the resolution dictated by the rules of the romance. There is no more urgency in her tone, no worry that anything other than happily ever after will result from her narrative machinations: "שְׁבִי בִתִּי עַד אֲשֶׁר תֵּדְעִין אֵיךְ יִפֹּל דָּבָר כִּי לֹא יִשְׁקֹט הָאִישׁ כִּי־אִם־כִּלָּה הַדָּבָר הַיּוֹם/Sit, my daughter, until you know how the matter turned out, for that man won't rest – he'll settle the matter today!"[419] Naomi is a master of regulative rules,[420] repeatedly demonstrating her ability to understand how to wield societal norms and the dictates of etiquette to shape her and Rut's story.

Chorus and Choreography

Naomi's status as storyteller is further highlighted by her relationship with the chorus. Naomi is the character who engages most with the women of Beit Lekhem, going so far as attempting to direct the collective that functions as a narrator. She proves herself to be an impressive improviser. I apply literary historian Stephen Greenblatt's definition: she has the rather useful "ability to capitalize on the unforeseen and to transform given materials into one's own scenario."[421] Following multiple tragedies and extremely altered circumstances, Naomi sees opportunities in every new piece of information that reaches her. Professor Nehama Ashkenasy

[418] Ruth 3:14.
[419] Ruth 3:18, translation my own.
[420] Searle, John R. "What Is a Speech Act?" *Critical Theory Since 1965*. Edited by Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle, University Presses of Florida, 1985, 61-62.
[421] Greenblatt, Stephen. "The Improvisation of Power." *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, The University of Chicago Press, 2005, 227.

casts Naomi as the *servus callidus* or *servus delusus* to Rut's *virgo* and Boaz's *senex*, the power puppeteering the plot.[422]

Naomi is not the only one dictating the movements of the characters: the text itself provides plenty of building blocks for blocking. Levy follows the theatrical thread beyond dialogue in his examination of the nonverbal clues in *Rut*, the structure and "stage directions." He proposes that the *megillah* divides well "into a typically dramatic structure of twelve distinct scenes, marked by entrances and exits and major shifts in time and space."[423] Levy further highlights the explicit and implicit mentions of time of day or night.[424] While his focus lies in lines that indicate these broad distinctions in setting, I see them as only a few among a number of phrases that appear extraneous if the *megillah* is viewed as a simple written narrative, but could be viewed through a performance lens as stage directions. Some indicate a shift in location or time, others a shift in tone or direction of a line. One of the latter type of passages occurs when Rut reveals to Naomi Boaz's invitation to continue to glean in his fields. Naomi responds: "וַתֹּאמֶר נָעֳמִי לְכַלָּתָהּ בָּרוּךְ הוּא לַיהוָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא־עָזַב חַסְדּוֹ אֶת־הַחַיִּים וְאֶת־הַמֵּתִים וַתֹּאמֶר לָהּ נָעֳמִי קָרוֹב לָנוּ הָאִישׁ מִגֹּאֲלֵנוּ הוּא/And Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, 'Blessed be he to God, who has not abandoned compassion, for the living and for the dead!' And Naomi said to her, 'That man is our kin – he's a redeemer.'"[425] Within one line, the direction of Naomi's words is specified twice. The first confirms that the blessing is as much of Rut as it is of God, the second an indication of Naomi's change in tone from ecstatic praise to grounded explanation.

So much of *Rut* is about physical movement. The moment on which the whole narrative hinges, Rut's defining speech, is prefaced by the titular heroine clinging to Naomi. Just the idea

[422] Nehama Aschkenasy, "The Book of Ruth: A Serious Comedy" *TheTorah.com*, 2023,.https://thetorah.com/article/the-book-of-ruth-a-serious-comedy.
[423] Levy, Shimon. "Ruth: the Shrew-ing of the Tame." *The Bible as Theatre*. Sussex Academic Press, 2000, 85.
[424] Ibid. 101.
[425] Ruth 2:20, translation my own.

of "turning away" that Naomi demands and Orpah enacts is a physical emblem, a physical action that has a particular type of metaphorical meaning that is attached to it. Rut's movements through the fields and carrying of the grain are key steps in the dance that defines the whole *megillah*. The carefully choreographed actions that make up the complex courtship on the threshing floor are crucial. This *megillah* is by nature embodied, theatrical, in its unfolding through meaningful movement.

The settings specified in could-be stage directions within *Rut* are familiar from other biblical tales and major events in ancient Israelite history, thus infusing them with affective power. Per Levy: "these spaces, with their connection to reality, are where cultural memory is celebrated and where a group identity is established, sustained, and transmitted."[426] Applying Levy's analysis of the historical significance of the settings in *Rut*, I suggest that the space itself becomes a tool for fostering and reawakening/redefining communal identity through either reminding the audience of shared histories attached to their indigenous land or reaffirming audiences' attachments to the land to which they have been allowed to return as an independent nation.

Like I have noted in *Shir HaShirim*, the action and behavior of the characters in *Rut* is impacted by their movements between private and public spaces, the transitions marking atmospheric shifts[427] and maintaining the momentum of the action. This shifting from indoor to outdoor settings and back sets the stage for the various performances of facets of themselves put on by the characters depending on who is or might be watching them. Within private, domestic spaces, Naomi unleashes the full extent of her behind-the-scenes power in contrast to Boaz who is in his element at the gates with the elders. Rut breaks the gender normative mold even more

[426] Levy, Shimon. "Ruth: the Shrew-ing of the Tame." *The Bible as Theatre*. Sussex Academic Press, 2000, 77.
[427] Levy, Shimon. "Ruth: the Shrew-ing of the Tame." *The Bible as Theatre*. Sussex Academic Press, 2000, 100.

than Naomi: she showcases her own form of subversive power in public settings through a weaponization of performances of femininity, making herself appear meek and vulnerable as a means to push Boaz to actions beyond the scope of expected hospitality and propriety. In a topsy-turvy twist, Rut plays up her public role in order to invite intimacy. By doing so, Rut plays on/into while actually subverting the idea that love implies female passivity.[428]

In addition, this domestic versus public space dynamic highlights thematic elements of the *megillah*. Levy notes the metaphorical messaging of the repeated return of *Rut* to the idea of a "house" as the narrative builds toward laying the foundation for the House of David,[429] and I posit that Rut is the "Eshet Khayil" at its center. Indeed, the drive toward a house of one's own underlies the entire story, from Naomi's instructions to her daughters-in-law to return to the "house of [their] mother"[430] to the blessing of the union of Boaz and Rut through the "house" that they will make together.[431] Even the backdrop of the story, the city itself, is Beit Lekhem, which translates to "the house of bread" (also providing us with another on-the-nose name in this story of famine, harvest, and home). As Levy notes:

> The dramatic space of *Ruth* gradually develops from an unfriendly location into a cordially inviting personal, social, national, and even re/symbolic womb (to women whose wombs will eventually produce King David).[432]

This story's movements between public and private eventually come together to create a union of the two, a house that holds together the community.

The community is a character unto itself in *Megillat Rut*, particularly the women of Beit Lekhem who speak with one voice throughout the story. This chorus of women enters into

[428] Loomba, Ania. "Sexuality and Racial Difference." *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama*, Oxford University Press, 1992, 43.
[429] Levy, Shimon. "Ruth: the Shrew-ing of the Tame." *The Bible as Theatre*. Sussex Academic Press, 2000, 101.
[430] Ruth 1:8.
[431] Ruth 4:12.
[432] Levy, Shimon. "Ruth: the Shrew-ing of the Tame." *The Bible as Theatre*. Sussex Academic Press, 2000, 101.

dialogue with Naomi and the audience, announcing and pronouncing major moments of transformation and change. Since the prologue of *Rut* begins with Naomi's nuclear family leaving Beit Lekhem and the character-revealing dialogue does not start until Naomi has lost everything and is on her way back, the audience has no point of reference for who this woman was before her world was rocked by a series of tragedies. The chorus of women provides clues in their surprised exclamation upon seeing Naomi return after ten or more years in Moav: their shock to see her broken down and in dire straits not only reflects Naomi's former place a prominent member of Beit Lekhem society, but also her ability to fill that role naturally. They barely recognize the woman who is so embittered and embracing her newly lowly position, suggesting to spectators by saying so that the Naomi they knew was drastically different. Their information is infused with emotion, in contrast to the lines that can be reframed as stage directions purely conveying context and action.

This same sort of neighborhood chorus later shares in Naomi's joy when Rut has a baby who is Naomi's grandchild by religious law. Their celebration could even be seen as tinged with gentle humor: they proclaim that "יֻלַּד־בֵּן לְנָעֳמִי/A son has been born to Naomi!"[433] in reflection of Naomi's excitement about and doting over this infant. They are invested in the action and play an active part, going so far as participating in the naming of this child whose arrival signals the realization of the turn from tragedy to classic comedy. They announce the scale of Naomi's tragic fall from grace, and they (comically) proclaim the consolation of the bereft Naomi and continuity of the character's bloodlines into future generations.

Subversive Strength and Performing for Power

The loving teasing of the chorus at the end of *Rut* is far from the only example of comedy infused into the high-stakes story; as is evidenced by Boaz's dialogue, the punny naming

[433] Ruth 4:17, translation my own.

conventions, and the layers of humor infused into the language, comedy is one of the most powerful storytelling tools deployed in this *megillah*. Some of this comedy is immediately apparent, such as the silly singsong name given to Ploni Almoni or Rut arriving back from the threshing floor holding a bundle of grain in her clothes, possibly making her look pregnant. Other humor requires a level of understanding of Hebrew language and Jewish culture, such as the names of Naomi's sons or the sexual innuendo of Rut uncovering Boaz's feet. Similar to the reverse call-and-response in *Esther*, the latter type of layered comedy offers affirmation of belonging to those who understand it. This speaks to the theme of opting-in, with membership to the Jewish people validated through active participation in Jewish life that would foreground getting all of the jokes. The layered humor also enables the *megillah* to operate like a well-made family comedy, a piece that can be performed for the whole community together with something for everyone.

Comedy in *Rut* is explored by Ashkenasy as well, who ties the humor to the carnivalesque nature of the *megillah* itself:

> The locus of the carnival in Ruth is the open field on the night of the barley feast, yet from the very opening of Ruth, its carnivalesque subtext is evident, allowing counter-hegemonic, subversive, and mocking voices to run parallel to the official, serious, and pious tone of the ruling class. This tone emphasizes heterogeneity and misalliances, puts social decorum and norms to mockery, and sanctions the comic release of the forces of disorder, thus reaching at the end a state of collective healing and communal union. The constant presence of the community and its diversity of voices create the Bakhtinian heteroglossia…the storyteller is the communal voice, the folk,

relishing the subversive elements in a familiar tale, told in anticipation of public seasonal celebrations or during the actual festivities.[434]

I agree that it is the pervasive presence of the community within the text that makes the comedy of *Rut* possible and that the resultant comedic release gives the *megillah* the power to form/fuel community in turn. The fictionalized community within the narrative mingles with the real one receiving the story, bringing the disparate members of the latter together through the upending of social norms and societal barriers by the characters they are observing (and, at times, laughing at or with) the story together.

The power of subversiveness is brandished by the titular character herself as well. In the same vein as Esther, Rut is able to wield the tools of her own archetype to her advantage, a parallel supported by Levy's comparison of how both "made active, intelligent and virtuous use of their bodies as well as their feminine charms, in order to gain a position for themselves and for their people."[435] Even the details of the steps Rut takes to prepare herself to visit Boaz on the threshing floor parallel those Esther takes before approaching Akhashverosh uninvited, both women using performances of culturally conventional femininity, the same "stylization of the body,"[436] to manipulate the courses of action taken by those purportedly with power over them.

As was the case with Esther, I see in Rut's actions an illuminating connection to Judith Butler's arguments regarding the performativity of gender constructs. Applying Butler's conceptions of gender performance relying on contextual norms and observers' belief that particular behaviors and bodily renderings dictate one's legibility in a gender category, I see Rut as a master of manipulating the performativity of gender to dictate how she is read. Rut not only

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[434] Aschkenasy, Nehama. "Reading Ruth through a Bakhtinian Lens: The Carnivalesque in a Biblical Tale." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126, no. 3, 2007, 442-443.
[435] Levy, Shimon. "Ruth: the Shrew-ing of the Tame." *The Bible as Theatre*. Sussex Academic Press, 2000, 84.
[436] Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4, 1988, 519.

takes others' words and flips them to form connections, but she also does the same with societal expectations for her gender and the perceptions of her. Naomi might be the storyteller within the story, but Rut is the canny performer. She is well aware of her role and performs it in ways that subtly shift power into her hands without flipping the script so completely that it would disrupt her journey toward happily ever after.

The whole threshing floor scene presents Rut's metaperformance of exactly the right gestures of femininity, a combination of seductive allure and seeming submissiveness, to lead Boaz down the desired path to taking action for their shared future and thereby ensure Rut's and Naomi's survival as well. Rut engages in a "re/present"ing while also going beyond Naomi's instructions, adding "authentic, unrehearsed texts and gestures"[437] to enhance her performance and shore up her power in this high stakes situation. She follows Naomi's direction through uncovering Boaz's "feet," then brings in her speaking skills to reflect Boaz's previous language back at him and add a flavor of flattery with accountability to the sexual scenario. She redirects his blessing for her to receive God's protection by using the same words to request his instead, setting Boaz up as so great that inaction would be irresponsible for someone placed in such a powerful position by their prostrated postulant.

Rut plays into one category of identity performance as a path to power and, by playing that role so well, somewhat obfuscating her Other status as a Moabite. Rut specifically leans into the role of Jewish Woman, making herself into an "object of belief" on multiple levels.[438][439] This performance is particularly prominent in the threshing floor scene: Rut plays the part of the woman subject to Levirate Marriage, heightening her enactment of socialized femininity and

[437] Levy, Shimon. "Ruth: the Shrew-ing of the Tame." *The Bible as Theatre*. Sussex Academic Press, 2000, 94.
[438] Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4, 1988, 519.
[439] It is truly difficult to resist a pun with a point.

implying her belonging to the Jewish people. She is "embodying certain cultural and historical possibilities."[440] Rut moves through the motions of one obeying the Israelite laws of *Shikhakha*, physically constructing her desired identity by already enacting it. She "does [her] body"[441] in the style of a cultural insider abiding by the rules of Levirate Marriage, thereby embodying Jewish womanhood. She repeatedly performs the gestures of the vulnerable maiden from Jewish biblical texts, thus telegraphing to Boaz the possibility of following the same historical and storied path from vulnerable maiden to Jewish wife.

Medieval and modern exegetes alike have debated whether Rut and Boaz did enact a Levirate Marriage, technically speaking, since the laws outlined in *Dvarim*[442] specify that this act applies to a deceased man's childless widow and his brother, which Boaz is not, nor does Rut herself participate in Ploni Almoni's repudiation of his role as redeemer, which is part of the legal ceremony to relieve a redeemer of responsibility.[443] I agree with those who point out that in the text itself, however, the union between Rut and Boaz is repeatedly framed as functioning in the same way as a Levirate Marriage, including through their progeny carrying forward the name of Rut's late first husband[444] and in the indication to Ploni Almoni that marriage to Rut and inheritance of her late husband's land go hand in hand.[445] Whether or not this is technically a Levirate Marriage in the narrow legalistic definition from *Dvarim*, the text associates it with one.

This ties in with the overarching theme I trace through *Rut*, that of belonging versus not belonging and opting-in. The flexibility of Jewish law is visible in Rut and Boaz's enactment of

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[440] Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4, 1988, 521.
[441] Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4, 1988, 521.
[442] Deuteronomy
[443] Ibn Ezra's commentary on *Rut* contains one of the earliest iterations of this argument, with which subsequent interlocutors engage to either expand or disagree.
[444] Ruth 4:5 and 4:10
[445] Ruth 4:3

Levirate Marriage – similarly to what can be seen in the context of fasts,[446] the Jewish code of law is understood to be not necessarily absolute. Rather, survival preempts strict following of the law in all sorts of contexts, and this flexible application of the idea of Levirate Marriage based on both Rut's and Boaz's performances as subjects of that law is not only relevant to the physical survival of Rut and Naomi, but also the general survival of the Jewish people at the time *Rut* was written. This legal malleability offers an answer to the crisis of intermarriage faced by returnees from First Diaspora in the form of active enactment that provides evidence of intent to opt into the Jewish way of life.

Performativity, in its entwined meanings, points on the one hand to law and on the hand to theatre, realities made real by enactment and consensus. What is performativity and what is performance depends on intention and societally agreed-upon conditions. As Searle explains, speech acts do not occur in a vacuum – aim and context are key.[447] The words of a marriage ceremony are a speech act at a wedding, but on stage they are put in metaphorical quotation marks, detached from the power to transform the conditions of the speakers. Rut repeatedly demonstrates both an understanding of the need for conditions and intention and an ability to create the former through the force of the latter in order to enable her enactments of opting-in to shape her reality.

Alter suggests that Rut's performance with Boaz is itself a re-enactment of the "betrothal narrative" featured in the early Mosaic books.[448] Beginning with the Patriarch-Matriarch pair of Yaakov and Rachel and repeating with other prominent couples, including Moshe and his wife Tzipporah, the betrothal narrative consists of a "stranger" coming to a well in need of water and

[446] As discussed in the *Eicha* chapter
[447] Searle, John R. "What Is a Speech Act?" *Critical Theory Since 1965*. Edited by Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle, University Presses of Florida, 1985, 60.
[448] Alter, Robert. *The Art of the Biblical Narrative*. Basic Books, 2011, 70-72.

their future partner providing that along with food and an entry into the local society. In the Mosaic books, the "stranger" is consistently the man and the local the woman; with Rut and Boaz, however, the genders are reversed. I offer that this can be read as another nod toward Rut's quiet power in this scenario, her deployment of performance to kick off the narrative. This is also the first indicator of Boaz's acceptance of Rut's performance of Jewish Womanhood, her choice to be part of the Jewish people, through his accepting of her as his scene partner in this familiar meet-cute.

Staging the Collectivized Body in Context

Throughout her performance of Jewish Womanhood, I propose that Rut becomes an analogy for the Jewish journey. Her story begins with her choice to stay with Naomi and embrace all that comes with the Israelite experience, culture, and faith, leaving the land with which she was familiar to "return" to Israel, paralleling the Exodus and Mt. Sinai experience. The choice in the *megillah* of the word "return" to describe Rut's journey with Naomi to Beit Lekhem is interesting in that only the latter is returning: Rut is travelling to a new land, but, like the Israelites leaving Egypt, it is one to which she already has a connection and which will ultimately become her home, ruled by her descendants. Her story is scaffolded in sorrow and pain (loss of her husband, famine, poverty) and existence on the sidelines, making her a figure of empathy not only to converts but to Jews across time and Diasporas as the eternal Other. In the end, she finds salvation through a combination of her own labor of love, collective support, and coincidence that nods at divine intervention, once again connecting to the Exodus narrative arc as well as the prophecies and prayers for eventual redemption in Jewish tradition.

Through this mapping, Rut thus becomes a figure of aspirational hope as well as reified identity, the vague, mythologized "Eshet Khayil" concretized into a single figure who becomes

the cornerstone of Israelite/Jewish unified future, especially when placed in context. This is further shored up by the parallels between her and Boaz and the power of their coming together to form not just a marriage, but a partnership of equals – the concept that will feed into the *Shavuot ketubah*[449] and the idea of being partners with God in the interpretation of the Torah, which becomes a defining feature of Jewish identity in the Second Temple and, even more so, the Second Diasporic Periods.

Indeed, *Rut* embeds its audience in a complex web of historical framing. It is an origin story for a kingdom that is already history for its first audience who are, in turn, in the process of reviving some semblance of that kingdom. Though the actual origin point and authorship of *Megillat Rut* is the subject of ongoing debate, one popular view dates the text to the Persian period and the early days of the return from the First Diaspora.[450][451] This argument is supported by the earliest surviving physical evidence of the text itself that has thus far been discovered, including the Dead Sea Scrolls, written between the third and first century BCE, as well as the literary style of the text itself.[452] This timeline would place the writing (or, at least, popularization) of *Rut* to a period during which the Israelite people – now more frequently called Judeans or Jews – were at a crossroads of identity as the descendants of those who had been sent into exile were reunited with those who had remained in the land of Israel, indigenous sovereignty was returned (with variations of tributes required from dominant empires), the reestablishment of Temple-based worship and agrarian life were on the horizon, and the possibilities of mingling old and new ways of life led to questions without clear answers.

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[449] Jewish marriage contract
[450] Grabbe, Lester L. *The History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period, Volume 1: Yehud, the Persian Province of Judah*. Continuum, 12 August 2010, 105.
[451] Aschkenasy, Nehama. "Reading Ruth through a Bakhtinian Lens: The Carnivalesque in a Biblical Tale." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126, no. 3, 2007, 442.
[452] Alter, Robert. "The Book of Ruth." *Strong as Death is Love: The Songs of Songs, Ruth, Esther, Jonah, and Daniel*. W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2015, 57-58.

One such question was that of intermarriage and conversion, which are deeply relevant to *Rut*. From the period of the Exodus until the First Diaspora, Judaism had largely been a closed ethno-religion, a culture and faith into which one was born and one still structured around tribal origins. Ancient Israel was not unlike many of its Mediterranean counterparts in seeing marriage outside the ethno-religion as something largely reserved for diplomatic purposes, and even then highly debated and often unpopular. One's culture, heritage, national identity, familial roots, and religious beliefs/practices were all entangled together in a Gordian Knot.

The tensile strength of that knot, like the one Alexander the Great severed with his sword, was violently tested through the First Exile and the crises that followed. I offer that, similar to *Shir HaShirim*, *Rut* operates as an answer to the compounding identity crises of the early Second Temple Period, in this case serving as a response to the question of what was to become of those who had intermarried while in the First Diaspora, providing them with a blueprint to stay in/rejoin the Jewish people through this other exceptional moment of opening the largely closed ethno-religion. It is not, however, a story championing intermarriage and the erasure of ethnic identity, but rather one of finding a place for those have already opted to join, who are determined to become a part of the Jewish people, as well as a story of learning from them and what makes them the exceptions to the rule about what Jewish identity means, thus responding to two post-exilic return questions. Rut is positioned as "the archetype-mother of all – especially female – converts to Judaism"[453] and her path paving the way for others to enter the otherwise-closed community by proving their determination and dedication to joining the Jewish people. There is no framework for Rut to opt in, she is not presented with the opportunity. In fact, Naomi goes as far as to say there is no place for her, yet Rut makes then takes the opportunity. She can, in that way, be held up as the template for forging a path through which to

[453] Levy, Shimon. "Ruth: the Shrew-ing of the Tame." *The Bible as Theatre*. Sussex Academic Press, 2000, 84.

join a largely closed community or rediscovering one's place in it after a fracture by performing membership until it becomes real.[454]

The marriage-centered narrative of *Rut* can be positioned as being in conversation with the contemporaneous question of the status of diasporic marriages following the return to Israel allowed by the restoration of indigenous rule following the First Diaspora. The possible resolution offered by *Rut* is to reframe the question as one of commitment and continuity: are these marriages able to (re)integrate into Jewish community or do they disrupt the process of reunion and reforging/rediscovering/reinforcing collective Jewish identity, established originally through the Exodus and Sinai experiences and subsequently evolving into a more unified and enactable iteration forged through the shifting crucible of the era of the *Shoftim* into the establishments of the monarchy and First Temple.

Rut is set in the period of the *Shoftim* in which *Rut*, which also pairs this *megillah* with *Shir HaShirim* and *Tu B'Av*, with their question of intertribal marriage. Thus that, too, can be a source of insight for not only these diasporic intermarriages, but also the potential post-diasporic unions of people who had differing diasporic experiences and, therefore, different relationships with their Jewish identities that emerged from those experiences. After all, how different might it have been to figure out how to be Jewish in the Persian capital city of Shushan versus on the island that is now known as Djerba?[455] How do the Jews coming together after a century of developing those disparate diasporic survivance strategies reconcile their approaches to Jewish identity now that they have the opportunity to become one unified people again? The divisions of

[454] This is a large part of the modern conversion process: a prospective convert is first turned away multiple times with warnings of the difficulties of being Jewish, then engages in active Torah study and a kind of trial run of Jewish practice under a mentor.

[455] Djerba remains a site for Jewish pilgrimage due to its history as one of the oldest continuous diasporic communities and the relics it protects from the earliest days of the First Diaspora, including what is believed to be stone from the Temple of Solomon that was rescued from the Babylonian destruction and brought by the exiles to the island.

the twelve tribes are no longer the primary sites of separation between Israelites; rather, it is their very strategies to literally and spiritually survive exile that pose possible hurdles to unity.

Scaffolding *Shavuot*

These thematic elements of *Rut*, with its emphasis on choosing to be part of Jewish community and together forge the future of the people, speak strongly to its use in the context of the festival of *Shavuot*. *Shavuot* is the shortest by far of the three *Regalim*, and both *Sukkot* and *Pesach* include extended departures from regular life, especially in connection to how one eats (in the *sukkah*[456] or completely free from *khametz*). There is no script like the *Haggadah* or set with precise specifications like the *sukkah*. In fact, the defining parts of *Shavuot* are not spent at home at all: of the three *Regalim*, this one might focus most on community in diasporic practices. Originating as one of the three pilgrimage festivals that served as pillars of the Israelite year during the First and Second Temple Periods, *Shavuot* started as a primarily agrarian holiday with spiritual and communal elements springing from rituals of thanksgiving for the spring harvest:

> In Exodus 32:16 Shavuot is referred to as the "Harvest Festival"; in Numbers 28:26 it is *yom habikurim*, "the day of ripe fruits." The Mishnah describes at length how during Temple times, the farmers made elaborate preparations and then a great procession to Jerusalem. Over time the meaning of Shavuot became obscure. The sages of the Talmud referred to it only by the name *Atzeret*, which indicates an abstention from work and is described further as a conclusion to Passover. The *Book of Jubilees*…gives an entirely different spin on Shavuot. The word *shavua*, "week," is a near-homonym to the word for "oath" (*shevuah*), and the anonymous author of Jubilees says that Shavuot was…the "Feast of Oaths," a holiday long before Moses, commemorating the oath sworn by Noah

[456] The makeshift hut in which all meals are eaten and as much time as possible is spent during *Sukkot*

and his sons not to eat blood with flesh (Genesis 9:4). Abraham, says Jubilees, was alone in his keeping this oath…

But Shavuot gradually took on another meaning in the post-Temple times – the one it has today – as *seman matan toratenu*, the anniversary of the day when Moses received the Law on Mount Sinai.[457]

I suggest that this concept of oaths, contextualized in this way, not only connects to the specific diasporic communal traditions to not eat meat on *Shavuot* and to the *ketubah* tradition (to be discussed in depth shortly), but also, more broadly, positions *Shavuot* as a sort of vow renewal between God and the Jewish people on the anniversary of that first promise at the foot of Mount Sinai. The holiday becomes a re-enactment of God's promise to cleave to the Israelite people ("אָנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ/I am your God"[458]) and the people's oath, in turn, to take on the Torah actively ("נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע/We will do and we will hear"[459]), the echoes of both of which can be heard in Rut's oath to Naomi.

The evolution of *Shavuot* into a Torah-focused holiday shifted the festival's center from the harvest sacrifice to the tradition of the *tikkun*:

> The custom of *Tikun lel shavuot* [*sic*], "The Restoration of the Night of Shavuot,"[460] is to remain awake and study Torah the entire first night of Shavuot. There are several explanations for this, but…the *Zohar*…describes Shavuot as the wedding day on which the Children of Israel are the bride and the Torah is the groom. To prepare her spiritual

[457] Kosofsky, Scott-Martin. "The Month of Sivan." *The Book of Customs: A Complete Handbook for the Jewish Year*, HarperCollins Publishers, 2004, 164.
[458] Exodus 20:2, translation my own. This line is immediately followed by the commandment of spiritual monogamy, "לֹא־יִהְיֶה־לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים עַל־פָּנָי/You shall have no other gods before me," phrasing which Rashi interprets to mean "as long as I exist."
[459] Exodus 24:7, translation my own. The full line reads "וַיִּקַּח סֵפֶר הַבְּרִית וַיִּקְרָא בְּאָזְנֵי הָעָם וַיֹּאמְרוּ כֹּל אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר יְהוָה נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע/And he [Moses] took the book of the covenant and read it to the ears of the people, and they said 'We will do and we will hear.'"
[460] This is a really interesting translation of the word "*tikkun*" in this context, with implications of a return to original form.

> dowry, the bride remained awake all evening studying…In Israel it has become a custom to gather at various places in Jerusalem for an all-night *tikun*, ending at the Western wall; in the United States many synagogues hold study seminars.[461]

This concept of community gathering to study together on the first night of *Shavuot* is not unique to the 21st century nor to Israel and the United States: a book from a *tikkun* in a diasporic Ashkenazi community in 1740 contains biblical passages, including the stories of creation and the giving/receiving of the commandments at Sinai, the text of *Rut* itself, songs of praise, and sections of Talmudic texts.[462] A *Shavuot* schedule from the Park Avenue Synagogue advertises a similar lineup of learning and prayer centuries later in the United States, in 1929.[463] The *tikkun* held at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale in 2026, which I attended in person, once again featured talks and discussions on specific biblical texts, references to *Rut*, and communal singing of songs of praise, each of which was supported by the circulation of source sheets to all those in attendance, source sheets that look like the printed cousins of the 1740 book of sources for study and song.

It is important to emphasize how staying up all night engaging with Torah serves as a means of re-enacting the time spent at the foot of Mount Sinai awaiting the Ten Commandments, the initial opting-in of the Israelite people. The practice of *tikkunim*[464] places the focus on scholarship and community, the very Jewish value of discourse and debate layered with mutual support and celebration as celebrants engage one another in discussions and presentations and in staying awake. Poring over texts and source sheets with increasingly bleary eyes as the hours

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[461] Kosofsky, Scott-Martin. "The Month of Sivan." *The Book of Customs: A Complete Handbook for the Jewish Year*, HarperCollins Publishers, 2004, 165.
[462] "Tiḳun lel Shavu'ot," 1740, MS 4385, SHF 1565:33, The Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York, NY.
[463] "Shavuot Services Schedule," June 1929, Box 63, Folder 10, The Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York, NY.
[464] Plural of "*tikkun*"

march on, nudging your dozing neighbor gently to wake them up, social strictures falling away as exhaustion rises so that discussions grow more lively and unrestrained, and all coming together in one space to study regardless of social station with no one person more comfortable than another. It is a sort of shared frenzy of scholarship that shakes free of societal barriers and personal comforts that could signify those distinctions — it all comes back to community and commitment, including clinging to one another through the hard parts. Rabbi Arthur O. Waskow ends his chapter on this history of *Shavuot* by asking how communities might engage embodied practices to bridge the Temple and diasporic versions of the holiday through a sort of "show and tell" featuring the presentation of achievements by celebrants over the course of the year.[465] I suggest that the *tikkun* presents an extant answer to Waskow's question: members of the community come together to share knowledge they have gained, insights they have made, and questions they have formed by wrestling with the Torah. Rut's active opting-in carries through the *tikkun* in both intent and viscerality.

The formula of excitement and exhaustion also lends itself to a kind of intoxication, a feeling of otherworldliness. This liminality is layered with a transformation of space that is traditional in some communities, wherein the synagogues are decorated with greenery to symbolize the spring bursting into summer, furthering the shared immersive experience of a liminal other space, a simulacrum of the wilds of Sinai and the traditions of the Temple. Community, discourse, text, and (ritually-informed) food – that is all that exists in those odd hours between sundown and daybreak. I view this as almost Dionysian in the pursuit of an altered state of mind to unleash celebrants in free exploration (in this case of Torah study),

[465] Waskow, Arthur. "Peak Experience – Shavuot." *Seasons of Our Joy: A Modern Guide to the Jewish Holidays*. Beacon Press, 1982, 202.

enabling them to use than feeling to ritually perform (as the Israelites at Sinai) and thus mentally and physically prepare to face the divine.

Taking the community back to Sinai also ties to the passage from *Yekhezkel*[466] (already the trippiest text of the *Tanakh*) that is read during the following morning services – before anyone who participated in the *tikkun* has had the chance to sleep and shake off the mystical mistiness of the sleepless night. This is Yekhezkel's revelation of God, possibly the most surreal section of the entire biblical canon, featuring sentient wheels and four-faced, four-winged, one-legged angels[467] surrounding the sapphire throne of God, an awesome image that provides a parallel to the possible experience of the Israelites at Sinai,[468] made all the more visceral by that heady sleepless feeling. This reading paired with ecstatic exhaustion, communal conversation and learning, and decoration turn the study spaces of *Shavuot* into liminal spaces that exist outside of normal time, everyday existence, regular regulations and habits, and normative reality. The synagogue and other ritual spaces become the sites wherein the heterotopia of the *Shavuot* festival is physicalized in community.

Furthermore, as Waskow notes, this Sinai-like vision moves, in contrast to the visions in the rest of the *Tanakh* that are "rooted in a single place."[469] This unique feature thus operates as an assurance to diasporic communities that engagement of the divine through grappling with the Torah is possible no matter where they are; indeed, Yekhezkel himself is described as being in captivity when this revelation took place. Assigning this section to *Shavuot* reifies the Pharisaic/rabbinic centering of Torah study – an active pursuit rather than a passive trait – as a

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[466] Ezekiel
[467] *Yekhezkel* is one of the earliest sources of the fearsome image of the "biblically-accurate angel."
[468] Waskow, Arthur. "Peak Experience – Shavuot." *Seasons of Our Joy: A Modern Guide to the Jewish Holidays*. Beacon Press, 1982, 197.
[469] Waskow, Arthur. "Peak Experience – Shavuot." *Seasons of Our Joy: A Modern Guide to the Jewish Holidays*. Beacon Press, 1982, 197.

cornerstone of Jewish practice, a defining element of Jewish identity that can be carried anywhere by the people who choose to take it on.

In addition to the reading from *Yekhezkel*,[470] the morning services following the *tikkun* on *Shavuot* include particularly performative pieces that have evolved in different diasporic communities. In Ashkenazi congregations, the liturgical poem *Akdamut* is recited responsively. It features 90 lines of praise and promise, including the following:

> The ecstatic opening which says of God, "Were all the skies parchment and all the reeds pens, all the seas inks and everyone a scribe, God's grandeur still could not be near spelled out."
>
> A passage that carries forward the Shavuot theme of partnership between God and human beings by echoing an ancient legend: Just as traditional Jews on weekday mornings pray wearing the prayer-straps-and-boxes called *t'fillin*, bearing within them a parchment with the verses "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God – the Lord is One," so God, as it were, wears *t'fillin* that say "Great is Israel, a unique people."
>
> A passage that looks forward to the Messianic moment.[471]

I see in this layered litany of declarations and celebrations echoes of the themes not only of *Shavuot*, but of *Rut*: the power of storytelling, the importance of equal partnership, and a mindset of futurity looking toward a time of peace and harmony heralded by the messiah. In *Akdamut*, too, is the return of the alphabet acrostic that formed the majority of the structure of *Eicha*, along with so many other Jewish liturgical texts, including "*Eshet Khayil*." This time the Hebrew abjad

[470] And *Rut* in Israel, where *Shavuot* is one day, rather than the two-day doubling to provide a buffer for miscalculation in diasporic communities.
[471] Waskow, Arthur. "Peak Experience – Shavuot." *Seasons of Our Joy: A Modern Guide to the Jewish Holidays*. Beacon Press, 1982, 193.

unfolds in a poem of pure praise, a triumph of the totality formed by the union of God and the Jewish people that is in the process of being (re)enacted by the practices of *Shavuot*.

Sephardi and Yemenite communities do not chant *Akdamut*, but rather read aloud a ceremonial *ketubah* between God and the Jewish people at that same point in the service, immediately preceding the Torah reading. This metaphorical marriage contract not only connects to the betrothal narrative of *Rut* and the question of diasporic intermarriage to which it is responding, but also a greater idea of opting-in. Among the most widely-used *ketubot* is one written by Israel Najara, one of the sixteenth century mystics of Safed (making him at least a contemporary of, if not one of, the mystics who introduced the tradition of the *tikkun*):

> Friday, the sixth of Sivan, the day appointed by the Lord for the revelation of the Torah to His beloved people…The Invisible One came forth from Sinai, shone from Seir and appeared from Mount Paran unto all the kings of the earth, in the year 2448 since the creation of the world, the era by which we are accustomed to reckon in this land whose foundations were upheld by God, as it is written: "For He hath founded it upon the seas and established it upon the floods" (Psalms 24.2).
>
> The Bridegroom [God], Ruler of rulers, Prince of princes, Distinguished among the select, Whose mouth is pleasing[472] and all of Whom is delightful, said unto the pious, lovely and virtuous maiden [the people of Israel] who won His favor above all women, who is beautiful as the moon, radiant as the sun, awesome as bannered hosts: Many days wilt thou be Mine and I will be thy Redeemer.[473] Behold, I have sent thee golden precepts through the lawgiver Jekuthiel [Moses]. Be thou My mate according to the laws of Moses and Israel,[474] and I will honor, support, and maintain thee and be thy shelter and refuge in

[472] This language should sound familiar: it is a barely-paraphrased line from *Shir HaShirim*.
[473] And here we have references to *Rut*, both in the "virtuous" woman and the promised redeemer.
[474] This line is a very loud nod to the line recited during the Jewish marriage ceremony as the ring is being proffered.

everlasting mercy. And I will set aside for thee, in lieu of thy virginal faithfulness, the life-giving Torah by which thou and thy children will live in health and tranquility.

This bride [Israel] consented and became His spouse. Thus an eternal covenant, binding them forever, was established between expositions of Scripture, including Sifra, Sifre, Aggadah, and Toseftah.[475] He established the primacy of the 248 positive commandments which are incumbent upon all…and added to them the 365 negative commandments.

The dowry that this bride brought from the house of her father consists of an understanding heart that understands, ears that hearken, and eyes that see. Thus the sum total of the contract and the dowry, with the addition of the positive and negative commandments, amounts to the following: "Revere God and observe His commandments; this applies to all mankind" (Ecclesiastes 12.13).

The Bridegroom, desiring to confer privileges upon His people Israel and to transmit these valuable assets to them, took upon Himself the responsibility of this marriage contract, to be paid from the best portions of His property.

All these conditions are valid and established forever and ever. The Bridegroom has given His oath to carry them out in favor of His people and to enable those that love Him to inherit substance. Thus the Lord has given His oath. The Bridegroom has followed the legal formality of symbolic delivery of this document, which is bigger than the earth and broader than the seas. Everything, then, is firm, clear, and established.

I invoke heaven and earth as reliable witnesses.

[475] Categories of the codified Oral Torah.

May the Bridegroom rejoice with the bride whom He has taken as His lot and may the bride rejoice with the Husband of her youth while uttering words of praise.[476]

This mirror of the marriage contract encompasses an oath between God and the Jewish people, read aloud as a renewal and re-engagement of the peoples' half of the speech act of the *ketubah*, which, if the congregants believe the surrounding spiritual and theological concepts, aligns with Searle's rules for promising: they are engaging in an ongoing conversation with God, God wants their active commitment, this commitment involves (hundreds of) actions and obligations that would otherwise not be naturally undertaken, the people intend to keep the promises of the *ketubah*, and the utterance of it constitutes its undertaking.

I argue that assembling to recite morning prayers together on *Shavuot* means that, like Rut on the road with Naomi, the congregants are already enacting elements of their promise. The very act of renewing their oath of devotion to God connects to the first three of the Ten Commandments handed down by Moshe at Sinai: this commitment to the terms of the *ketubah* implies that the congregants accept God, reject other gods (the *ketubah* is a contract for a monogamous union), and are invoking God's name in an earnest promise that they intend to continue to fulfill. Like the Najara *ketubah* above, other iterations of the *Shavuot ketubah* include quotes from biblical texts such as *Tehillim*, *Shemot*, and the passage from *Mishlei* that was adapted into the song "*Eshet Khayil*."[477][478] These references not only provide familiar and poetic touchpoints amidst the legalistic Aramaic text, but also are a further reification of what is being sealed and celebrated: the bond between God and the Jewish people, embodied through engagement with the Torah.

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[476] Waskow, Arthur. "Peak Experience – Shavuot." *Seasons of Our Joy: A Modern Guide to the Jewish Holidays*. Beacon Press, 1982, 194-195.
[477] Unknown. "Shavuot Ketubah." Posen Library of Jewish Culture & Civilization, 19th or Early 20th Century, https://www.posenlibrary.com/entry/ketubah-shavuot.
[478] Ben Joseph, Saadia. "Ketubah shel Shavuot." Jewish Theological Seminary Library, approximately 1570-1573, https://makor.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/delivery/01JTS_INST:01JTS/1256194490007706.

In this spirit, a range of diasporic Jewish communities have taken on the custom of confirming 16-year-old members of the congregation as part of the *Shavuot* festivities in the synagogue. This practice to have these almost-young adults promise to "adhere to Judaism and the Torah" began in Reform congregations in Germany during the second decade of the 19th century and has since spread to communities that identify as Conservative, Orthodox, and other denominations.[479] Across diasporic communities and denominations, *Shavuot* celebrates the opting-in at the center of *Rut*.

Opting-In

Shavuot and *Rut* reflect the same answer to a crisis of diasporic/post-diasporic Jewish identity: one's background matters less than one's commitment to showing up and staying through the hard part, placing passion and participation in communal support above the things that might separate us. The affect loop of communal connectivity created by the *megillah* and its contextual conditions is exemplified by the very narrative structure of *Rut*. Giles and Doan assert the following:

> The *something* and *nothing* offered to us by Naomi's storyteller pulls the listeners into the story. She relies on her knowledge that the spectators are not merely a group of individuals, but a community – a "we" with a shared identity. A relationship between storyteller/actor, the characters of the story, and the audience emerges as a kind of feedback loop that relies on the shared knowledge of the story and its subversive qualities.[480]

[479] Waskow, Arthur. "Peak Experience – Shavuot." *Seasons of Our Joy: A Modern Guide to the Jewish Holidays*. Beacon Press, 1982, 200.
[480] Doan, William J. and Terry Giles. *The Story of Naomi-The Book of Ruth: From Gender to Politics*. Biblical Performance Criticism, Volume 13, 29 January 26, 75.

Though Giles and Doan were speaking about a theoretical ancient performance of *Rut* as a proto-play, I see that the affect loop to which they are referring actually applies to every communal reading of the *megillah*. The relationship between characters and audience is reaffirmed with each reading/performance, the unifying qualities of *Rut* "feed[ing] back into and transform[ing] the reality they describe."[481] The community must come together for *Rut* to be legible, and the community's identity – and thereby its ability to come together – is affirmed by *Rut*.

More connections between the opting-ins of *Shavuot* and *Rut* emerge in the form of the myth that all Jewish souls were present at Sinai, including those that were fated to convert in the future. To convert into the largely-closed ethno-religion, one must essentially earn an MA and MFA degree in Judaism, engaging in intensive study supervised by a rabbinic authority and supported by the community one wishes to enter. This process of conversion emerged and was concretized after the writing of *Rut*, during the Second Diaspora when the question of intermarriage and maintaining Jewish communal identity arose with new urgency when the Jewish people once again faced the combined crises of dispersal and persecution. The emphasis on Torah study and embodiment of the values contained in the Torah was further strengthened through the practices constituting conversion, which demanded that Jewishness be defined for those entering into the covenant, and *Shavuot*, the holiday that had become a symbol of said covenant. Taking it upon oneself to be an active and engaged member of the Jewish community is at the core of Jewish identity: the importance of this active opting-in was shown in the struggles of the First Diaspora, further emphasized by the Second Temple Period (in terms of the choice to return to indigenous land from exile and then to reform a united Jewish people in said

[481] Massumi, Brian. "Introduction: Concrete is as Concrete Doesn't." *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Duke University Press, 2002, 11-12.

indigenous land, as well as the sectarianism that is held up as a major factor in the downfall of the Second Temple Period), and the Second Diaspora which came to encompass even more far-flung communities and repeated uprooting and need to reestablish Jewish community with every expulsion and flight from persecution (making it a repeated choice to be part of Jewish community and to find/remake it as an answer to crisis).

Placed in this context of crises and paired with *Shavuot* practices, *Rut* could thus be read as re-presenting the promise of active opting-in to the Jewish people. The ending of the *megillah* adds to this communal identity-affirming power. Ending on a double-emphasis of Rut and Boaz as the ancestors of King David and all the rulers who followed positions the *megillah* as a re-origin story for the Jewish people, not replacing those that had come before it (such as the Exodus), but rather offering a fresh addition for the (post-)diasporic world. Tying it to the Davidic monarchy supports the importance of the story of *Rut* by turning the text into a sort of prologue to much of the biblical canon, keystones of Jewish/Israelite history. Ending *Rut* by tracing the lineage of the House of David re-presents the people with a connection to that canonized past and to a monarchy whose first two reigns were arguably the most internally harmonious time in Israelite history.

In this way, the thrice-valorous couple of Rut and Boaz lend their glory to the re-origin story of the royal house comprised of their descendants, confirming the drive to revive the spirit of the early age of the monarchy. "*Eshet Khayil*" is attributed the the second sovereign of the House of David, King Shlomo, the monarch renowned for his wisdom and under whom the united kingdom of Israel experienced an age of unprecedented and as yet unrepeated complete peace and prosperity. King Shlomo is herein established as Rut's descendant and the textual connection through the line of valor could be spun into a secondary mythologization of the king

writing the acrostic song of praise about his ancestress. This further feeds into the possible purpose of the *megillah* to reestablish the royal House of David, to tap into its unifying and uplifting power. *Rut* provides a unity-reviving origin story that speaks to the contemporaneous moment (via elements such as Naomi's return from a sort of exile and Rut's opting-in and proto-conversion following exilic intermarriage) as well as the glorified past. The double-listing of Rut's descendants places emphasis on the direct line from Yehudah[482] to David through her, offering continuity and innovative options for belonging. Thus engaging with *Megillat Rut* presents an opportunity to enact a hoped-for future via the past.

A parallel can be drawn to SanSan Kwan's analysis of the affective power on the collective in the performances of the Cloud Gate Dance Theatre, a national dance company in Taiwan, and their production *Legacy*. The Taiwanese and Jewish communities are two semi-diasporic peoples reconnecting with/reconstituting collective identity; therefore, I see in Kwan's analysis of *Legacy*'s power a useful lens through which to view *Rut* taking on a similar function. Kwan investigates the process of building community through creating collective memory, conveyed and sustained through rituals such as commemorative ceremonies that reenact mythological or historical pasts, offering connection through origin stories.[483] Like *Legacy*, *Rut* offers a community, facing ongoing questions and crises of identity, a connection to collective memory and a constant re-creation of such memories ensconced in embodied rituals. The *megillah* provides a new origin story and a connection to all of the older ones, from the first opters-in (the Patriarchs and Matriarchs who, like Rut, actively chose to leave their families to follow this new way of life; the power couples whose stories followed the same betrothal

[482] Judah
[483] Kwan, SanSan. "Vibrating with Taipei: Cloud Gate Dance Theatre and National Kinesthesia." *Kinesthetic City: Dance & Movement in Chinese Urban Spaces*, Oxford Academic, 23 May 2013, 34.

narrative as Rut's and Boaz's; and the post-Exodus Israelites who swore their oath at Sinai) to the Davidic monarchs who served the Israelites in their independent indigenous land.

This re-origin story adds the Mother of All Converts to the pantheon of legendary progenitors, a fresh figure, tied to established icons, to meet the needs of the Jewish people recovering from the first exile and onward. Nadine Holdsworth examines the place of national iconography in the legibility of collective identity and the need for the former to shift in order to stay relevant and useful for the latter.[484] I posit that *Rut* is the vehicle for rethinking the national icon that is the Royal House of David for the societal shifts caused by diasporic existence. The addition of *Rut* as a prologue to the tale of the House of David renews the legendary power of the monarchical family and refreshes its origin from among the people – just as David himself was. The legendary king started his story as a shepherd, a youngest son, a soldier, a musician, an underdog who was really among the people before he was king. This underdog origin might well be lost beneath the gilt and gleam of centuries of rule from atop the hills of Jerusalem. Rut, following behind the reapers, and Naomi, connecting with the chorus of village women, bring the House of David back to the people. The people, in turn, are raised up to reconnect with the heights of their mythologized past as a means to move forward together into a brighter future. *Rut* enables not regression or progression, but rather a sort of communal re-enactment of collective identity.

The application and amplification of these multi-pronged powers through performance reframing serves to activate and affirm community and communal values during current and future crises. The story of *Rut* centers on a woman who left the Jewish people and came back alongside another who followed her into the community and wove her way to its heart. Together with Boaz, the characters model commitment to one another, engagement with community, and

[484] Holdsworth, Nadine. *Theatre & Nation*. Palgrave Macmillan Ltd., 2010, 55.

active enactment of the roles and promises they take on. They teach us how to (re)enact opting-in.

Translation Notes

Esther was the first of my translations I completed. After approximately two years of working on it, I began sharing my drafts with colleagues and scholars who could provide insight into the effectiveness and accuracy of the translation. This began with a small gathering of MFA students (and one undergraduate student) at UCSD, wherein they read aloud and discussed my translation. From that gathering, I not only noted areas where my translation was clunky, but also the reactions and reflections of theatre artists and scholars who had varying levels of familiarity with the source text.

One of the primary pieces of feedback I received was the need to clarify certain cultural values and aspects of the story that are legible to those who have grown up within the ethno-religion but less so to anyone who has not. The most prominent example of this was the section about the Jews defending themselves against attackers, which includes a number of the dead attackers. What has been conveyed through oral tradition and an understanding of Jewish values and laws is that the deaths were not cause for celebration. In fact, Jews are supposed to grieve all deaths, even those of our enemies, because all loss of life is a tragedy. That cultural knowledge couples with the national memory of how ancient legal systems such as the Persian one depicted in *Esther* operated. Any decree issued in the name of the king with his seal could not be overturned, even by the king himself. Such is the case with Haman's decree that all Jews within the Persian Empire can be killed on the 13th of the month of Adar. After Haman's execution, the decree still stood. Since they could not overturn it, Esther and Mordechai instead get permission from Akhashverosh to use his name and seal to issue a follow-up decree that allows the Jews to defend themselves without fear of punishment for killing their attackers in self-defense, as would otherwise have been the case. Additionally, Haman's decree did not

deploy the Persian army or even order every citizen to murder Jews; with the genocide's primary instigator gone, all that remained was an opening. Those who *wanted* to kill Jews had carte blanche to do so on the 13th of Adar without being concerned with repercussions. It was those who already held violent antisemitic desires who took to the streets and were killed in self-defense by the Jews. It is understood in Jewish communities that the preferred outcome would have been for everyone to have simply not chosen violence that day; the numbers of the dead are not celebratory, but rather convey a tragedy and a warning to those who harbor similar violent antisemitic desires. None of that is explicit in the text, but it is understood and accepted. I have sought to find a way to communicate the cultural knowledge entwined within each of the *Megillot* to anyone engaging with my translations.

In that vein, I utilized familiar verse and poetic patterns to convey the theatricality and tone of the language. The language of the source texts is lyrical, poetic, and I have tried to carry that tone and style into the English translations, making the texts sound poetic but not antiquated and inaccessible (which is sometimes how they are translated into English). The language is heightened, but in the same way that dramatic texts are, not in a gatekeeping way. For the lines I translated in verse in *Esther* and *Rut*, I chose to use iambic pentameter because that has been shown in practice to convey the balance of dialogue with drama/lyricism, which matches the source texts. For the non-acrostic lines in *Eicha* as well as the *Esther* passages read with *Eicha trop*, I switched into iambic trimeter, deliberately engaging the meter of Greek tragedy for the lines meant to invoke a sense of grief and both past and potential tragedy. Thus far in readings, workshops, and sharing my translation with theatre artists and Jewish studies scholars, I have been met with reactions that it is reminiscent of Greek theatre and family theatre (like fairytale/folklore performed storytelling), which fits the purpose and meaning of the texts:

communal gatherings to engage with a performance of national history/mythology as part of a ritual celebration, with whole families in attendance. I further intend to find ways to incorporate the melodies of each *megillah*'s *trop* into performances, offering a sort of score for the translations to harness the affective power of the traditional music.

Another reaction that emerged from the readings was the acknowledgement of a need for Jewish stories that are celebratory – uplifting a story that is ultimately happy, made accessible through the translation/adaptation for the stage. Translating *Esther*, *Rut*, and *Shir HaShirim* as performance texts allows for Jewish stories that are not only happier, but much older and more universal to the whole Diaspora than the typical Holocaust and Russian pogrom stories that make up so much of the representations of Jewish identity and history in popular culture, memory, and narratives, obfuscating our long history and diverse population, as well as our Middle Eastern indigeneity. *Eicha* offers not celebration, but a combination of hope and a vessel for continually compounded griefs to be shared and shouldered together. These translations are a reminder of the place of Jewish culture in history, the longevity and ancientness of the nation, and actual Jewish values. Centering only the typical European-focused 20th century stories of struggle means highlighting only tragedy and pain, select recent traumas, and a narrative dominated by those who sought to destroy us.[485] The *Megillot* are from our canon, display our values and history, and are a living part of our tradition.

Each text in this *Megillah Cycle* has its own purpose: they each have affective impact individually and create something powerful when put together. *Esther* grapples with becoming and belonging, survival, communal obligation, and the power of performance. *Eicha* deals with

[485] When first typing this sentence, I accidentally typed "destory" instead of "destroy," and I think there is something to that. They sought not just to murder Jews, but to control how Jews and Jewish history would appear in the historical narrative, most clearly evidenced by Nazi collections of Jewish artifacts.

collective tragedy, *shiva* shared by the whole Jewish people moving toward hope. *Shir HaShirim* offers energy and futurity and a connection to indigenous land. *Rut* maps out opting-in, collapsing time for togetherness, and comedic communal engagement. Taken together, the *Megillah Cycle* re-enacts the arc of diasporic survival and provides new tools for engaging with the *Megillot* and their holidays in order to activate their affective, unifying, enlivening power for the present moment and all that is to come.

Esther:

Hiding, Hope, and Nahafokh-Hu

CHARACTER BREAKDOWN:

HADASSAH/ESTHER: Jewish woman, young adult, first generation born in the diaspora

hah-da-SAH

MORDECHAI: Jewish man, middle aged, Esther's uncle and guardian, former courtier and advisor in the Judean royal court

MORE-deh-khai

AKHASHVEROSH: King of the Persian Empire through conquest and marriage, from somewhere within the Persian Empire

ah-KHASH-veh-rowsh

HAMAN: Chief advisor to Achasverosh, descendant of the Amalekite king Agag

hah-MAHN

CHORUS LEADER: Citizen of the Persian Empire, able to step into various roles within the narrative, Jewish (a version of ESTHER telling the story)

CHORUS: Citizens of the Persian Empire, Judeans/Israelites in the diaspora, messengers, party guests, etc

Characters who step out of the CHORUS/the CHORUS LEADER becomes:

VASHTI: Queen of the Persian Empire by birth and by marriage, Persian

VASH-tea

HATAKH: Royal messenger

ha-TAKH

KHARVONA: Advisor to Akhashverosh, from somewhere in the Persian Empire

khar-VOH-nah

ZERESH: Haman's wife

ZEH-resh

MEMUKHAN: Advisor to Akhashverosh, from somewhere in the Persian Empire

meh-moo-KHAN

BIGTAN: Chamberlain to Akhashverosh

BEEG-tahn

TERESH: Chamberlain to Akhashverosh

TEH-resh

HEGAI: Guardian of the maidens' chamber

heh-GUY

LADY-IN-WAITING: Lady-in-waiting to Esther, from somewhere in the Persian Empire

NOTES:

- The underlined lines are call-and-response
- The name of Haman is traditionally "drowned out" (noise is made by the audience whenever it's said)
- This is a story of reversals, of joy, of survival. It should be an immersive celebration, festive and carnivalesque
- This story cannot be told without music and community

Prologue

For the miracles

For delivering us

For each moment of strength

For every breath of hope

For all the wonders

That You did for our ancestors

On these days back then

(*repeated in counterpoint with:*)

In the days when Mordechai and Esther

Watched over Shushan, at the center of Persia

When they stood against the evils of Haman

Who struck out to destroy

To kill

To erase

All Jews from the face of this earth

Youths with their lives before them

Elders with stories to tell

Infants in their mothers' arms,

On one day

The thirteenth of the twelfth month

The heart of Adar

And take what they had left

Behind

And You in Your mercy

Disturbed his plan

Misled his mind

And brought his evil down on his own head

Leading him to the gallows he'd built for Mordechai instead

For the miracles

SCENE I

Shushan, the capital of the Persian Empire.

The opulent court of Akhashverosh,

at a feast, served by a team of servants,

Perhaps including BIGTAN and TERESH.

The CHORUS LEADER holds a scroll,

telling us the story it contains,

the actors entering and forming tableau

as they are summoned into the story.

CHORUS

Seven years had gone by since Akhashverosh

Took the throne: all Persia at his command

From India to Ethiopia

One hundred twenty-seven nations

At his feet. And so he called for a feast.

From nobles to servants they came and ate

And drank upon the gold and silver plates –

Musical shift – Eicha

Plundered perhaps from the

Temple of Solomon

Razed by Babylonians,

Led by the former king

The late father of Vashti,

Now queen these seven years

Musical shift – back to Esther

For seven days all were welcome to court,

And in they streamed to the capital city,

From the oldest man to the babes in arms,

To join the unfettered celebration,

And wine flowed as freely as the Tigris.

CHORUS LEADER

So, too, did Queen Vashti hold her own feast,

Welcoming all the ladies of the realm

T'dine together in her royal comp'ny.

At last the seventh day arrived;

By then rivers of wine had been imbibed:

AKHASHVEROSH

Fetch me Queen Vashti!

Ensure that she comes wearing her crown, so that all of these fine folks from across my empire may behold the great beauty of my wife.

KHARVONA goes to VASHTI

KHARVONA

His Majesty has summoned you to appear before him and his guests.

And he asks that you come wearing your crown…

VASHTI

No.

KHARVONA

No?

VASHTI

No.

[I have had enough.

I am a princess of the blood, this throne is my right.

My *husband* has proven yet again that he is nothing more than a usurper, unfit to rule.

The blood of generations of Babylonian kings runs through my veins;

That same blood stains my husband's hands, and now the disgusting drunkard dares to summon me, to demand that I dance before his cronies wearing the crown in which I should rule the nation. And I presume that in his specificity lies his true order: that I appear in nothing but my crown. Am I right? No need to answer, I know the mind of the swine I was forced to marry. Tell him, simply,

No.][486]

KHARVONA returns to AKHASHVEROSH

and quietly relays her refusal.

AKHASHVEROSH

[486] This speech is based on Medieval commentators filling in the silent scene of Vashti's rejection of Akhashverosh's call, provided in brackets as an alt. to help make this interaction clearer, but not necessarily to be spoken aloud.

Tell me, all you so-called wise men of my court, what should be done with a queen who refuses the direct orders of her lord and husband? What punishment befits the disobedient Vashti?

MEMUKHAN

Vashti did not wrong you alone, sire: she has attacked us all, from the highest noble to the lowest man in your vast empire. For word will no doubt spread that the queen did not follow the command of her king and husband, and thus she sets a dangerous precedent: why should any wife obey her husband when the king's wife does not? Sire, you stand at a treacherous crossroads.

Thus I urge you, if it please Your Majesty, to send word across your empire in every language – announce the prompt removal of Vashti from her place beside you on the throne. Replace her with a woman of your choosing, better and more beautiful. Issue with that a decree that every wife, from the youngest bride to the oldest grandmother, must respect, honor, and obey her husband and master.

AKHASHVEROSH

(*As riders are seen/heard/felt dispatching and spreading the word in the multitude of languages spoken in the Persian Empire)*

Let it be so! Send riders to every corner of my kingdom.

Let all know that each man shall be the lord of his house!

SCENE II

A house in Shushan,

Decorated in Israelite style, with just a small dash of Persian.

It's not grand, it's comfortable,

A haven.

Maybe a little too small for two people.

MORDECHAI appears.

CHORUS

In the fortified heart of the nation

Lived a Judean man named Mordechai,

The son of Shimi son of Kish [keesh], noble

Benjaminite exiled in the first wave

Of destruction wrought when King Yechonya [yeh-KHON-yah]

Fell to the rough hands of Nevuchadnetzar. [neh-VOO-khad-nets-are]

(*HADASSAH appears*)

Left in his care, an orphan, both parents lost

Some time between the Babylonian

Conquest and this ill-fated annivers'ry.

CHORUS LEADER

Hadassah [ha-da-SAH]. Esther. Cousin in his care.

A woman of many labels. Dangerously

Single.

Subject to the new decree that summoned

Every unwed woman to the king.

MORDECHAI

And when you go, remember-

HADASSAH

Don't tell them my birth name, don't tell them where we're from, don't tell them I'm Judean. I remember.

MORDECHAI

Good.

A dance begins.

It's sexual, but not sexy.

Each young woman goes from one side of the space,

armed with whatever she chooses from HEGAI,

then goes to the king center before being sent to the other side.

There, she becomes a member of the house of concubines,

and her hair is braided

(the first by the attendant, then a chain forms as each helps the other).

At last, it's HADASSAH's turn.

She doesn't take a thing.

HEGAI stops her by the "door."

They have a Moment

She straightens her back and walks to the king.

The dance begins, but it doesn't end the same way.

It doesn't truly end at all.

They've begun a dance that will last until one of them dies.

HADASSAH is crowned.

In that moment, she becomes ESTHER, the hidden one.

CHORUS

And so the king found his new queen and hurled

Her up, placing the crown upon her curls,

And tasked her to balance in Vashti's chair,

Declaring his new love for all to hear,

He watched his new young queen at her first feast –

From across th'empire people came to stare.

"Esther's Banquet" it was joyously named:

Pardons 'cross the provinces were proclaimed,

Gifts upon the populace were showered,

From the royal pair who above them tower'd;

Taxes were paused for the coronation

Of the woman who'd risen past her station.

Yet she remained shrouded in mystery –

None came forth with hints to who she used t'be.

Th’maidens of th’empire were gathered once more,

And an old Judean courtier by the door

Of the gates to the palace kept vigil

But still of her past the new queen said little

MORDECHAI

No matter where you are

Or who asks

Don’t tell them your birth name

Don’t tell them where we’re from

Don’t tell them you’re

Judean.

ESTHER

No matter where I am

Or who asks

Don’t tell them my birth name

Don’t tell them where I’m from

Don’t tell them I’m

Judean.

I know.

CHORUS LEADER

But the new-crowned queen was not alone

Guarding her secrets at the palace gates.

MORDECHAI remains by the gates.

Enter BIGTAN and TERESH, severally.

BIGTAN

Friend or foe?

TERESH

Friend, you oaf.

BIGTAN

Did you get it?

TERESH

Here. When he is exhausted at the end of the evening with his new wife and summons us for the thousandth time/, that's our moment.

BIGTAN

/Ugh.

TERESH hands BIGTAN a vial.

BIGTAN

How much?

TERESH

Just two or three drops in his golden goblet.

Exeunt all but MORDECHAI

MORDECHAI

(*turning to speak with a guard or servant at the gate*)

Fetch me Hatakh, footman to the queen.

It is a matter of life and death! Hurry!

MORDECHAI quickly writes a message

HATAKH takes it and brings it to ESTHER

ESTHER reads it and runs to the king in their

private chambers, where AKHASHVEROSH is sitting

with a SCRIBE

ESTHER

Your Majesty-

AKHASHVEROSH

What is it, my love?

ESTHER

I came to warn Your Grace:

Two of your chamberlains, Bigtan and Teresh, plan to poison you this very night!

AKHASHVEROSH

(*to a servant*)

Send for Kharvona. Have this matter investigated immediately!

(*to ESTHER*)

From where did you get such bitter news, my sweet?

ESTHER

The old judge, Mordechai, who sits at Your Majesty's gates.

He overheard their plot and sent word the fastest way he could –

AKHASHVEROSH

If this is true, I owe him my life.

(*to servant*)

What are you waiting for? If my wife's warning proves sound, I want to see them on stakes upon Shushan's gates by dawn! Let all know what happens when you plot against the life of the king!

SERVANT

Straightaway, Your Majesty.

AKHASHVEROSH

(*rounding on the SCRIBE*)

And you, follow after him and return with the full report. Future generations shall hear about the day I defied death, and of the downfall of the villains who would have murdered their rightful king!

SCENE III

CHORUS

After the fall of his two chamberlains,

Th'shaken king reassessed his retinue

And raised through the ranks an ambitious vizier

By the name of Haman

Audience interaction –

This is the moment in which we establish that his name

should be drowned out whenever it's said aloud

Son of Hamdata, whose ancestor,

Bloodthirsty King Agag, once ruled over

The Amalekites, hunters of the weak,

Killers of the ill, slayers of stragglers,

The young, the unarmed, and the defenseless;

The man who had once been in the grasp of Shaul, [shah-OOL]

First king of Israel, whose misplaced mercy

Meant more death at the hands of the man

He allowed t'live despite divine commands –

And the pains of his people. The ancient foes

Now both haunted the halls of the palace

And its gates: Haman the Agagi,

Chief vizier at the right hand of the king,

And Mordechai the Jew, new Persian courtier

From the old and tragic House of Shaul,

And his niece, the young Queen Esther balanced

Between them all as the court changed course.

A dance of court politics unfolds

as the situation is described, the

CHORUS playing the part of courtiers and commoners

CHORUS LEADER

In an act lacking any subtlety

The king decreed that all of his subjects

Must bow before the new vizier or else,

And he didn't mean a little bob or

Courtly curtsy: All people in Persia

High and low, had to get down on the floor

And prostrate themselves fully before Haman.

MORDECHAI and HAMAN come face to face.

Neither moves

CHORUS

But Mordechai would not.

CHORUS LEADER

What do you think you're doing, transgressing

The king’s decree? Get down and bow, you fool!

MORDECHAI

No.

CHORUS LEADER

Don’t you value your life? Just bow.

MORDECHAI

I can’t.

CHORUS LEADER

Did you hurt your back, old man? Are your knees

Too fragile to kneel? You don’t look so frail.

MORDECHAI

The problem lies not in my body, but my soul.

CHORUS LEADER

Is this some petty court rivalry?

MORDECHAI

I don’t care for my own honor.

CHORUS LEADER

Then what? What's your reason?

Triangulated scene, with the CHORUS LEADER relaying the information to HAMAN

MORDECHAI

I am an Israelite
a Jew. I'll only bow low for the god of Israel,
my god.

CHORUS LEADER

He says he is
a Jew and will bow to his lord,
the god of Israel.

HAMAN

Let's see how well your god protects you, then, Mordechai the Jew. You and all your people. You don't deserve to die alone: I will weed out every Jew in this kingdom and destroy them, so you may drown in the blood of your nation.

Movement/dance:
CHORUS LEADER or SERVANT brings
HAMAN lots and he casts them, over and over,
in a loop, growing more frustrated with each turn,
until he finally finds the answer for which he was searching.
This is not a lottery as we think of it now: he's playing with
magic and mysticism, trying to predict the future
During this, the CHORUS narrates

CHORUS

On the fourteenth of the month of Nisan,

In the twelfth year of King Akhashverosh,

Haman cast a pur, [poor]

Reading the lots day by day, month by month,

Until they revealed his vengeance was best

Wrought on the fourteenth of Adar: a day

Eleven months hence, dragged out by destiny.

HAMAN is seated with AKHASHVEROSH

in his privy chamber,

talking policy over wine and delicacies.

At some point, HAMAN rises from his seat to present his case

HAMAN

Your Majesty, there is one more issue I must bring to your attention.

AKHASHVEROSH

Go on.

HAMAN

There is one people in your vast empire that Your Majesty should not have to tolerate, a nation who are scattered and set apart, who follow their own laws instead of Your Majesty's, whose customs are strange and stay that way despite their diaspora. They are a threat to your kingdom, indeed to all of Persia. If it pleases Your Majesty, I humbly propose that you sign this act ordering their elimination.

AKHASHVEROSH

And this will cost…?

HAMAN

Not a copper from Your Majesty's pocket nor a coin from the coffers of the kingdom: I will finance the endeavor myself. I offer 100,000 silver talents to those who carry out this decree, to be paid into the royal treasury.

AKHASHVEROSH

If you're so concerned that you'll spend your own fortune on this, then keep your silver: the crown will back you. Do as you see fit with this upstart nation. Take my signet ring so you don't have to trouble me for signatures.

The CHORUS return as a team of scribes,

repeating the decree in a round, layering in

other languages on the second pass

HAMAN

Send this to every province, every territory, every town. Translate it into every language spoken within our borders, make sure it's enforced by every governor and understood by every nation. Take this down:

I, Haman of the House of Agag, in the name of King Akhashverosh, hereby authorize all citizens of Persia to join me on the fourteenth of the month of Adar in cleansing our empire. On that day, we will destroy the Jews. Kill them all: men, women, and children. We will eradicate them, erase the stain of their existence off the face of the planet. Whatever they leave behind will be yours for the taking when every one of them, from wizened elders to weeping babes, has taken their last breath.

CHORUS

And so copies flew across the empire
To every corner and through the capital,
From the decreed enemy of the Jews.

Music change – Eicha

The king and Haman sat
And drank without a care
While Shushan wept tears of
Grief and bewilderment

SCENE IV

The scene break takes place here, but the

CHORUS continues immediately from where they left off.

CHORUS LEADER

When Mordechai heard the terrible news,

He tore his clothes in anguish, dressed in sackcloth,

Streaked his skin with ashes. The old courtier

Walked the streets of Shushan, crying out

A wail of pain so bitter and broken

It could shake the very gates of th'palace.

A dance of mourning.

The CHORUS becomes the

Jews of Persia, crying out for salvation

And, perhaps, in a Mourning Cry for themselves.

The stage directions of Jewish prayer should be

interwoven into the dance:

Three steps forward, three steps back,

bowing forward, bowing to each side,

rising up on the balls of their feet in threes,

beating their chests over their hearts,

opening their palms and then kissing their fingertips

as they bring their hands back together,

covering their eyes with their right hands, etc.

CHORUS LEADER

As word spread all across

The Persian provinces

Of the deadly decree

Signed with the king's own seal

All the Jews of Persia

Followed Mordechai in

Fasting, praying, weeping,

The gray cloud of mourning

Consumed the nation as

It scattered all across

The land of Acheshverosh

And Esther.

Music change – back to Esther

ESTHER is in her presence chamber, holding court

Several of ESTHER's retinue rush in,

LADY-IN-WAITING

(*out of breath*)

Your Majesty! At the gate! The man!

(*gestures to try to get her message across*)

ESTHER

The man?

LADY-IN-WAITING

You know, the man! At the gate! The old judge? The courtier who asks about you?

ESTHER

Has something happened to him?

LADY-IN-WAITING

Must have. He's covered in ashes, he looks terrible, and his clothes are hanging on by a thread.

And he won't stop crying. It's very loud.

ESTHER

Did he say what was wrong?

LADY-IN-WAITING

He can't approach the palace gates dressed like that!

ESTHER

Hatakh!

(*CHORUS LEADER becomes HATAKH, the royal messenger, and comes over*)

Bring a set of clean robes to Mordechai at the gates so he can come tell me what has so grieved him. He caught a plot against the king's life before, he might carry the fate of the kingdom in his news again.

HATAKH hurries out.

Triangulated scene, with communication moving through

HATAKH between ESTHER and MORDECHAI,

MORDECHAI in the public space of the palace gates,

ESTHER in the public private of her chambers.

MORDECHAI

Please thank the gracious queen for her generosity and care, but I am afraid I cannot accept or change my clothes, even to see her in person.

ESTHER/HATAKH

Why not?

MORDECHAI

We have been sold.

Your Majesty may not have yet heard, ensconced safely within the walls of the queen's palace where the darkest decrees may touch you, but a great tragedy is unfolding in your land. The king

has listened to Haman. He's decided that the lives of all the Jews of Persia and its provinces, the whole diaspora, are worth 100,000 silver talents.

ESTHER/HATAKH

What?

MORDECHAI

Haman, the vizier, has taken my refusal to grovel before him as an excuse to finish what his forefathers started: he offered to pour silver into the king's treasury of plunder to pay those who follow his new edict mandating the annihilation of the Jews, the strangers within his borders. Here-

(*he produces a copy of the edict, which passes from MORDECHAI to HATAKH to ESTHER*

The decree echoes quietly around the space)

read the death sentence that has been passed upon your people, then go to the king and beg him to spare us.

ESTHER

I can't.

MORDECHAI/HATAKH

What?

ESTHER

You only see the king when he summons you. Everyone, the poorest peasant to the highest-ranking advisor, has to be called to the king. Anyone who has the audacity to enter his presence chamber without an invitation is sent to the scaffold: daring to go in uninvited on the miniscule chance he'll save you with the lifeline of his golden scepter is betting your life on a miracle. Nor would I bet my life on his love: he hasn't summoned me in thirty days.

HATAKH fades to an echo

MORDECHAI

So you'd let the rest of us live or die by the dice while you hide in your fading fairytale? Do not think that living in the king's castle will spare your soul alone while the rest of the Jews die.
If you hide in sheltered silence now, I have faith that some other kind of salvation will come for the Jews. But you and your house, your father's line, will be wiped off the face of this planet.
And who knows? Maybe it was for this very moment that you rose to royalty.

The triangle shifts.

ESTHER is taking the reins of the story

ESTHER

Gather the Jews of Shushan. Fast for me.
My ladies and I will fast together too,
No food or drink for three nights and three days,
Then, armed with your prayers, I'll to the king,
Unbidden.
(*Music change – Eicha*)

And if I die for this

It is not a true loss

A gamble of my soul

For thousands is far more

Than a worthwhile trade.

Music change – Esther

CHORUS

So Mordechai departed with new hope

To do the bidding of his niece, his queen.

SCENE V

Three days have passed.

A dance of preparation commences:

ESTHER, with her ladies' help, transforms

into the queenly ideal.

Paint, robes, regalia, oils and incense, halo of hair

braided with love by her ladies.

ESTHER moves through the delicate process

until she stands at the threshold of the king's presence chamber.

She breathes.

AKHASHVEROSH is sitting on his throne.

She steps in.

A moment.

All eyes turn to ESTHER, the queen breaking royal protocol.

The threat of another lost queen hangs in the air.

AKHASHVEROSH sees ESTHER.

AKHASHVEROSH

Esther!

(*Pause. The sort of spell she and her women cast,*

the prayers of her people,

her own power and determination

all converge and do their work on the king:

He extends his scepter)

You look enchanting.

(*She approaches him and touches the end of the scepter. She is safe. For now*)

What brings you here, my daring darling? Do you need something? You need only ask. I'll give you half my kingdom, just say the word.

ESTHER

If it please Your Grace, I have one request:

I have arranged for a small feast this evening,

All I need is the presence of my love,

Your Majesty, and that of Haman,

So we three may dine together in peace

Away from the chaos of the whole court.

AKHASHVEROSH

As you wish, my queen.

(*to a servant*)

Go, then! Fetch Haman, pull him out of his work and toss him on a horse if you have to. I won't have him keep the queen waiting.

CHORUS

And so it was that, over priceless goblets

Overflowing with sweet wine, the king sat

Between the queen and the man who didn't know

He sought her death. Thus Esther played her part:

ESTHER, AKHASHVEROSH, and

HAMAN are dining together in ESTHER's privy chamber,

reclining on rich couches over even richer dishes

AKHASHVEROSH

What would you ask of me, now that we're alone? Whatever you wish for, it's yours! If you told me now that you'd like half of my kingdom, I'd sign it away before the stars came out.

ESTHER

Your Grace, my request and my sincere wish,

If I have brought you joy, is that tomorrow

I may do so again. Join me here

For another feast, just you and Haman.

If you do, then I have something for you,

A secret you have sought since the night we met.

AKHASHVEROSH

(*kissing her hand*)

As you wish, my queen of mysteries.

CHORUS

Haman left the queen's feast with his spirits

Soaring on th'tails of his inflating ego,

Sure that his star was ever rising now,

That none could stand in the way of his plan.

Until

(*CHORUS has once again bowed low before HAMAN,*

but MORDECHAI remains upright.

The two come face to face, neither moving)

He saw the one man who would not

Grovel, genuflect, or get out of his way.

Though he dreamt of striking down the old upstart

By the gates where he stood, cooling his boiling

Blood with the Jew's spattered on the stones,

Haman was a man of schemes, not haste.

With checked anger, centuries of hatred,

And some bruised pride, he returned home to ask

His wife and household for venomous advice.

HAMAN

(*with a little less composure than usual, which continues to be chipped away as this scene unfolds*)

How dare he! Next to the king, I am the most powerful man in this whole empire! I have more wealth than I could spend in twenty lifetimes and ten strong sons to pass it to; I have precedence over the entire court, command of every citizen, no one would dare breathe in my presence without my say so! I have even been invited by the queen to dine privately with her and the king! Again! I should be the happiest man on earth, but no honor on earth could soothe me when I see that *Jew* (*an insult here*) Mordechai at the palace gates.

ZERESH

So? I see no problem here.

HAMAN

I will go mad with rage if I have to look at that man's stupidly fearless face one more time.

ZERESH

Then don't.

Get rid of him.

Would anyone raise a word in protest if they woke tomorrow and found him impaled on a spike? Build a scaffold so tall that the whole city can see what happens to someone who crosses you, fifty cubits high, then just ask the king in the morning if you can execute an enemy of yours. It'll be done by the afternoon, and you can go dine with the royal couple without a thing weighing you down.

HAMAN

Perfect. Absolutely perfect. We'll begin construction right away. No one sleeps until we've readied Mordechai the Jew for his eternal rest!

HAMAN, his sons, and his servants
get to work.
This is as much a celebration as it is a
tireless construction project.
ZERESH [ZEH-resh] oversees both, summoning
musicians, ordering servants in with
ridiculously fancy refreshments,
and conducting the construction like a dance.

SCENE VI

Nighttime

CHORUS

That very night, while Haman and his sons

Traded sleep for revenge served by scaffold,

Slumber escaped the king. Tossing and turning

In his grand royal bed, Akhashverosh

Called for the only thing he knew could soothe

His restless spirit: a bedtime story

About his favorite hero-

AKHASHVEROSH

Bring me the records of my reign, I want to hear a tale from the archives.

CHORUS LEADER

Himself.

(*stepping into the role of chamberlain to read to AKHASHVEROSH*)

Harp

Shortly after the blessed marriage

Of the noble king and his fair young queen,

Two wicked chamberlains plotted to take

The life of the great King Akhashverosh.

But the noble Mordechai overheard

And, well-versed in every language spoken

In this great empire, he could understand

Each treasonous word they spoke that night.

Through the queen, Mordechai sent a warning

And with it sped the traitors to their graves

Thus was the life of our holy king saved,

So that he could continue his great, long

Reign of peace and prosperity. The end.

AKHASHVEROSH

That's it?

CHORUS LEADER

That's all.

AKHASHVEROSH

What honors or rewards were awarded to Mordechai for this act of valor?

CHORUS LEADER

Nothing was done with him.

AKHASHVEROSH

No wonder I can't sle-

Sound offstage

Who goes there? Who is lurking in the courtyard at this hour?

CHORUS LEADER

Haman is hovering outside your door

Majesty. Should I send him on his way?

AKHASHVEROSH

He can come in.

HAMAN is shown in

HAMAN

Your Majesty, I'm sorry to bother you so late at night, but I have an urgent question for-

AKHASHVEROSH

And I have a question for you: what would you say should be done for a man the king wishes to honor?

HAMAN

(*To himself*)

Mordechai's death can wait for this. After all, who would the king want to honor more than me?

(*to AKHASHVEROSH*)

A man the king would like to honor? Have someone bring him the robes of state, the robes Your Majesty wore for your coronation, and the horse Your Majesty rode that glorious day,
and the imperial crown-
(*a Look from AKHASHVEROSH changes his direction*)
And send him the clothes and the horse through one of the most noble courtiers in your service, someone from a royal house! And have them dress the man Your Majesty wishes to honor, and place his old courtier's hands under the man's boot to help him into the saddle, then have this nobleman lead the honoree through the streets of the city and call out as they walk "Such is to be done for the man the king wishes to honor!"
Thus all can see and hear the great generosity their ruler bestows upon those who do him a good turn.

AKHASHVEROSH
Brilliant as always. Go now, take the robes of state and the horse you mentioned and do all the things you said for Mordechai, the Jew who is probably with the courtiers at the palace gates, as usual. And don't leave out a single detail of your brilliant plan.

HAMAN
Who?

AKHASHVEROSH
You! Go! Now!

Dance:

HAMAN gathers the clothes and horse and crown.

He finds MORDECHAI, sitting in his sackcloth

beside the palace gates.

The mortal enemies dance together,

HAMAN fighting his vengeful rage as he is forced

to kneel before MORDECHAI

as he showers him in honors and literally raises

MORDECHAI above him.

They move together through the whole space,

the phrase "Such is to be done for the man the king wishes to honor!"

repeated by HAMAN and the CHORUS

until it becomes the song to which they are dancing.

It fades out slowly as

MORDECHAI returns to the palace gates

and HAMAN hurries home to prepare for

ESTHER's feast.

It still echoes, quietly and hauntingly,

while HAMAN descends into furious despair,

burying his face in his hands, covering his ears,

collapsing to the floor.

This is where ZERESH finds him.

HAMAN

It's horrible. Horrible. I went to get the king to sign his death warrant. I was going to sleep sweetly and rise in the morning happy at the fall of Mordechai the Jew and instead I haven't slept for a single second, I'm covered in sweat and dust and the dirt from the bottom of that Jew's boot, and he's had the best day of his miserable life rather than the last!

Silence

ZERESH

If this Mordechai, before whom you have already abased yourself beyond recovery, comes from Jewish stock, you waste your breath plotting against them. You won't be able to topple him now that his star is on the rise: your fall before him will be total and terrible. Give up now, before your dark fate is sealed.

HAMAN

I can't, I can't just give up-

HAMAN should barely get the words out before the CHORUS interrupts him as royal chamberlains

CHORUS LEADER

Are you not ready yet? Her Majesty,
Queen Esther, awaits you at her feast
Hurry, there is not a second to lose!

SCENE VII

AKHASHVEROSH and HAMAN are reclining on

couches with ESTHER, wine flowing.

AKHASHVEROSH is delighted.

HAMAN is not at his best.

ESTHER is waiting for the right moment.

AKHASHVEROSH

What would you ask of me, my queen, Esther? I'll give it to you. What's your wish? Ask me to give you half my kingdom, and I'll give it to you right here, right now.

ESTHER

If I've found favor in your eyes, my king,

And if it please you, I ask for my life,

And I wish for the lives of my people.

Because we have been sold, me and my kin,

To all be destroyed, to each be murdered,

To be utterly obliterated.

Even if we had all been sold as slaves,

I would have kept silent, not risked your trouble.

But for our lives, I lay mine in your hands –

Husband, I implore you to intercede.

AKHASHVEROSH

What? Who? Who is it? Where is the man who has the gall to attempt such a thing?

ESTHER

A man who brings with him misfortune and

Enmity, Haman the wicked, this man.

HAMAN trembles in terror

as he looks at the enraged king and queen

AKHASHVEROSH

(*furious to the point of violence, takes ESTHER's hand and tells her, perhaps not verbally*)

I need a moment

AKHASHVEROSH steps into the courtyard to calm himself

enough to pronounce his judgment.

KHARVONA attends the king out there.

HAMAN, still terrified, goes to ESTHER

pleading for his life,

[HAMAN

I beg you, Esther, Your Majesty, my queen, please, ask him to spare me. The king will listen to you, he'll be merciful if you come to him with a gentle, feminine touch. (*course-correcting*) You know, I could've killed your uncle last night, but I didn't! What do you say, a life for a life?][487]

Breaking down until he collapses onto her couch,

weeping onto the hem of her robes, begging her to spare him

And that, of course, is when AKHASHVEROSH returns

AKHASHVEROSH

And now you dare try to assault the queen? Right under my nose?

HAMAN's face drains of blood

CHORUS LEADER steps in as KHARVONA and points out the window.

KHARVONA

Your Majesty, if I may, you might want to look outside at the enormous spike Haman had built on which to impale Mordechai, the very same Mordechai who spoke in Your Majesty's favor-

AKHASHVEROSH

Stake him on it.

CHORUS

And so Haman met his end atop that spike,

[487] This speech is based on Medieval commentators filling in the silent scene of Haman's begging, provided in brackets as an alt. to help make this interaction clearer, but not necessarily to be spoken aloud.

The selfsame spike he'd built in his own yard

For the murder of Mordechai the Jew.

AKHASHVEROSH holds ESTHER and watches

as HAMAN is dragged off by GUARDS.

As HAMAN disappears from sight, the king's fury abates,

and he returns to his goblet of wine.

ESTHER does not

SCENE VIII

CHORUS

That same day, the king gave Esther the queen

All estates that once belonged to Haman,

Sworn scourge and tormentor of all the Jews.

And Mordechai came to court to see the king,

When his dear Esther shared her past at last.

Once more, Akhashverosh took th'signet ring

From off his finger, taken from Haman,

Who had wielded it in his murderous plot –

He gave it now to Mordechai instead.

Queen Esther tasked her cousin with the run

Of all his foiled foe's immense estates.

MORDECHAI is attending the king as an advisor.

ESTHER once again enters the king's throne room.

This time, she appears before him as herself, wholly.

She kneels before him and cries.

ESTHER

I beg Your Majesty, please overrule

The edict of Haman of House Agag,

The scheme he wove to wipe out all the Jews.

AKHASHVEROSH

(*extending his scepter*)

Rise, my queen. What's the matter?

ESTHER

If it pleases Your Majesty, and

If I have found favor in your eyes, and

If this seems right to Your Majesty, and

If you look upon me with grace, I beg:

Write the governors across your empire

And undo the decree dispatched by Haman,

Son of Hamdata, of the House Agag,

That bloody edict calling for total

Annihilation of the Jews, a doom

Still now stamped in law in every province

Under your command. For how can I stand by

And watch the destruction of my people,

How could I bear the slaughter of my kin?

AKHASHVEROSH

My queen, I have already given you Haman's estate and executed him for seeking to strike down the Jews. I think the whole empire is already sure where I stand on this matter, and how much I support you. So why don't you and your uncle write whatever you see fit and send it to all of the Jews in my lands. Write it in my name and sign it with my seal. Nothing can revoke a decree sent and signed in my name, but you can combat it with one of your own.

The CHORUS return as a team of scribes,
repeating the decree in a round, layering in
other languages on the second pass

MORDECHAI

Today, on the twenty-third of Sivan, it is hereby decreed in the name of King Akhashverosh that on the fourteenth of Adar, all Jews across Persia, in every single one of the 127 provinces, are permitted to gather and fight back against those who would kill them. Indeed, on that day, the Jews can destroy, kill, annihilate anyone who attempts to slaughter them. On that day, and that day alone, they may even take the possessions of their attackers should they triumph in their battle of self-defense.

Send this to every province, translate it into every language spoken within our borders, post it for the public. And circulate it in the capital. Let every Persian know: the Jews will not be defenseless.

CHORUS

And so copies flew to every corner

Of the empire and through the capital

For the decreed salvation of the Jews.

That day Mordechai left the king's presence

In robes of state of vibrant blue and white,

A gold circlet upon his head, adorned

With a cape of fine purple linen, and

The capital city of Shushan sang

With the joy of hearty celebration.

A dance of celebration

CHORUS LEADER

It was a time of light and happiness,

Glory and jubilation for the Jews.

In every province, every last city,

Every place touched by the king's new decree,

The Jews rejoiced in gleeful relief,

Gathering for feasts and festivities.

Many others in the land looked with awe

On the miraculous rescue of the Jews,

And sought their secrets of survival

In the face of mandated genocide.

SCENE IX

CHORUS

So, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month,

The auspicious month of Adar, when both

Decrees – the murderous and delivering –

Took hold as the sun rose on Persian lands,

Those spurred by hate thought victory was theirs,

Ready to wash the streets in Jewish blood,

All was reversed!

The Jews triumphed over their attackers.

In every city, those who took up arms

With murderous intent were met in force

By the Jews gathered to defend themselves;

None could stand before them – all were struck down

With fear in the face of the survivors,

CHORUS LEADER

Nor did city officials high and low

Interfere with the quest of self-defense

For they held Mordechai, the new vizier,

In high esteem; they feared the man who

Had been raised to the apex of the court

And his fame had been heard ‘round the empire,

Yet he was still on the rise to greatness.

CHORUS

On that day, the Jews of Persia stood up

And fought against those who would destroy them.

In Shushan, the Jews defeated and killed

Five hundred men,

Who’d taken the opening made by Hama

To unleash their hatred in violent mobs.

Among them the ten bloodthirsty sons of

Haman, son of Hamdata,

Enemy of the Jews, and their names were:

(*in one breath*)

Parshandata and Dalphon and Aspata and Porata and Adalia and Aridata and Parimashta and Arisai and Aridai and Vayzata.

[par-shahn-dah-tah and dall-PHONE and ahs-PAH-tah and poe-RAH-tah and ah-dahl-yah and ah-ree-dah-tah and pah-ree-mahsh-tah and ah-ree-sigh and ah-ree-die and vie-zah-tah]

Numbers of dead were brought before the king:

There is no celebration

No joy in the bloodshed

MORDECHAI and ESTHER

watch from the wall

Goblets in hand, same as AKHASHVEROSH and HAMAN before

But they do not drink

They join in the cry

And pour their wine like tears.

ESTHER returns to the king's presence chamber.

She does not bow.

She does not kneel.

She does not need the scepter.

AKHASHVEROSH

Well, my dear, today the Jews took down 500 of their attackers, and all ten of Haman's sons were felled for following through on their father's fiendish scheme. What's happening in the rest of my kingdom?

What would you like, my queen? Ask, and it's yours. What is your wish? Say the word, and I'll do it.

ESTHER

Your Grace, if you please, grant the Shushan Jews

The freedom to save themselves one more day;

Perhaps prevent any further bloodshed

By displaying the bodies of Haman's

Sons alongside their father, a warning

To those who even now hunger with hate

For the destruction of the Jews, my kin.

AKHASHVEROSH

So you have wished it, so it shall be!

CHORUS

So once again, the Jews of Shushan stood

Their ground against those who would see them all

Wiped off the face of the earth. Despite

The warning, three hundred more chose to die

For spite and sadly fell in their campaign

Of malice in the capitol. Across

The rest of the king's empire, the Jews

Defeated their attackers, seventy-

Five thousand felled in their crusade of hate,

Yet even so the Jews took not a cent

From all their vanquished would-be murderers.

At last the Jews of Persia could rest,

And so the fourteenth of Adar became

A day of celebration lively feasts and hearty joy

Rather than one of despair and mourning,

And so it was for the Jews of Shushan

On the day that followed, when they too

Could breathe freely, in joy and not in grief.

CHORUS LEADER

And thus the Jews across the diaspora,

Even the most far-flung villages,

Celebrate the fourteenth day of Adar

As one of happiness, feasting, and of

Giving gifts to all their neighbors and friends.

Mordechai recorded these events and

Sent them off to Jews in in every corner

Of the Persian empire, urging that they

Celebrate the day they were able to

Rest,

The month in which their lots flipped all around

From utter sorrow to elation, from

Mourning to jubilation, to turn fasts

Into feasts, a day of festivity

And giving gifts to friends and those in need.

The Jews accepted his decree of joy.

To immortalize the awesome events

That had so turned ‘round in a few short months:

The events of the play repeat in dance during the above speech,

with CHORUS members taking on the parts

of the players.

First HAMAN casts lots and chooses the day of doom,

bringing the king into his dance of destruction.

Then ESTHER goes to AKHASHVEROSH

and takes him out of HAMAN's dance,

leading him into a new one of hope and empowerment,

which spreads across the space,

with all the Jews engaging in the Purim celebrations.

HAMAN and his sons are executed.

The story passes from hand to hand, generation to generation,

and echoes around the space as its retelling comes to a close:

CHORUS LEADER

Queen Esther, daughter of Avichayil, [ah-vee-KHAI-yil]

And Mordechai the Jew wrote it all down

Sending the whole tale as a message

Of peace and truth, the story of their fasts

ESTHER takes the scroll from the CHORUS LEADER

CHORUS LEADER/ESTHER

And lamentations, prayers and cries, the tale

Of lots, of Purim, to be remembered

And reenacted, celebrated and

Shared generation to generation.

Laid out the ways of eternalizing

The annual festival of Purim,

The legacy of Esther passed forward.

SCENE X

Picking up immediately where the last act

left off, though the echoes fade to a quiet chorus

ESTHER

King Akhashverosh now learned to govern

Through reason more than fear, advised wisely.

He placed a tax on the lands and islands

Of his empire, paying mind to them all.

The rest of his glorious reign as well

As the deeds of chief vizier Mordechai

Are recorded in the chronicles of

The kings of Persia and Media

For Mordechai the Jew became second

To th'king and in the eyes of his people

He grew ever more and more popular

And beloved, spreading goodness and peace

To all he knew and to his descendants.

For the Jews, it was a time of light and

Happiness, jubilation and glory.

Eicha:

Lamentation through the Ages

CHARACTER BREAKDOWN:

Survivor 1 – A survivor of the siege and fall of Jerusalem, embittered by loss

Survivor 2 – A survivor of the siege and fall of Jerusalem, hopeful in grief

Lady Zion – The embodiment of Jerusalem/mother of the Jewish people

Witness– A survivor(?) of the siege and fall of Jerusalem

Chorus – The voices coming together

NOTES:

- A mournful tune underscores the piece, persistent in its pain
- If possible, the lights are dim, shadows heightened, and the audience sits on the floor. It is crucial that the actors are scattered amongst them

SCENE I

The lights are dim, flickering like candles

or the embers of a burnt city.

The actors are seated on the floor, scattered through the audience,

so their voices come from within the community.

SURVIVOR 1 watches LADY ZION from afar,

a child shocked into their mother's mortality,

and their own resultant helplessness.

SURVIVOR 1:

Alas! The city sits isolated, deserted, that once thronged with people; she that was once great among the nations, a princess among the provinces reduced to serfdom.

Bitterly she weeps at nights, her tears running down her cheeks – she has no one to comfort her because all who loved her have been devastated, all her friends betrayed her, becoming enemies.

Cast out into exile was Judah, through affliction and hard labor; lodged among the nations, she could not find rest – caught, desperate, her pursuers overtook her.

Desolate in the absence of festival pilgrims, Zion's roads are in mourning; all her gates are deserted, her priests gasp with grief, her maidens miserable, and she is deeply embittered.

Enemies of Zion are at the helm and at ease, for God has afflicted her for all her transgressions, even her infants have gone into captivity, war-prizes of the enemy.

Far gone from Lady Zion are all her glories, her leaders were like harts who could find no field, feebly, they trudge before their pursuers.

Going through this time of affliction and diaspora, Jerusalem recalls all the delights from days gone by; when her people fell to enemy hands and none helped her, when enemies gazed and gloated over her annihilation.

How far has Jerusalem strayed – thus she has become untouchable, all who had once regarded her with respect now deride her shame in disgust; she herself can only cry and keen in pain, hopelessly shrinking back.

Impurity clings to her robes; she had not remembered how such things end, and she sank incredibly low; there is no one to comfort her-

LADY ZION:

See, O Lord, the depths of my misery! How the ignoble enemy gloats in glory!

SURVIVOR 1:

Jeering, the enemy gathers all she holds dear into their hands, for the nations have seen the jarring invasion of her holy Temple, all those You barred from the community.

Keening, her people search for bread; besieged, they have traded all their treasures for food, to keep their souls in their starved bodies-

LADY ZION:

Look at me, O Lord, and see how I have been devoured!

Let you who pass along the road never know this devastation – look at me and see; is there more lamentable an agony than mine, than the grief God has heaped upon me in wrath?

My bones burn with the fire God rained down from the heavens, crushing them down; God made a net to entangle my feet, hurling me backward, leaving me desolate, weakened by the day. Now the yoke of my transgressions, tallied by God's hands, is heavy on my neck, sapping to nothing my ebbing strength; God has given me into the hands of those I cannot stand against. Obliterating all my heroes, the Lord in my midst has appointed a time to break my young men, as one would crush grapes in a winepress, the Lord has trampled the maiden of Lady Judah. Pained beyond words, for all this I cry; my eyes-my eyes pouring tears, for any who would provide comfort, who could revive my spirit, are far away; my children are desolated, the foe has prevailed.

SURVIVOR 1:

Quaking, Lady Zion reaches out but finds no comforter: by God's decree, Jacob's foes gather round about him; Jerusalem has been cut off among them.

LADY ZION:

So is God justified, for I have rebelled against the word of the Lord. Hear me, all you nations surrounding me, and witness my agony – my maidens and youths have been taken into captivity! Tried as I might to call out to my friends, they have all thrown me over; my priests and elders thus perished in the city, searching in vain for food to bring them back from the brink of death. Understand me, Lord, for my anguish roils in the depths of my being; within my heart, every vein has twisted around at the bitterness of my own rebellion – outside, the sword's brutal violence creates childless parents, inside, death seeps through the walls.

When I cry out with none to comfort me – listen! All of my enemies heard my misery and exulted; for You did this, You brought about the day You threatened.

Yet now let all their wickedness come before You and deal with them with severity, with the zealous ruthlessness You have shown for my misdeeds; my keening fills the air, my heart is sick.

SCENE II

SURVIVOR 1 attempts to approach LADY ZION,

to comfort and be comforted,

but, through panic or pain, cannot bring themself to

and retreats

SURVIVOR 1:

Alas, in wrath the Lord has clouded over Lady Zion, cast her from the heavens down to earth – all the majesty of Israel dashed to the ground, the Lord's footstool forgotten on the day of fury.

Bloody, pitiless waste has the Lord brought down on all the dwellings of Jacob, even the very best strongholds of Lady Judah were razed in rage, the kingdom and its leaders are all disgraced.

Cutting down in anger all the might of Israel, God has withdrawn from the defensive line – foes can pour in unchecked, burning Jacob like a roaring flame, consuming from all sides.

Drawing a bow like the enemy, God's hand was poised like a foe, and killed all those who delighted the eye, pouring out wrath like fire in the tent of Lady Zion.

Engulfing Israel like an enemy, God swallowed up all her palaces, destroyed her strongholds, elevating in Lady Judah mourning and moaning.

Furiously stripping God's booth like vines in a garden, destroying that holy abode, God forced forgetting of festivals and Sabbath, and, in furious wrath, scorned both king and priest.

God has nullified the altar, spurned the Temple, handed the walls of the citadels to the enemy; giving cry in the House of the Lord, they made merry like it was a festival day.

Having thought to destroy the walls of Lady Zion, God drew a course and did not withdraw a hand for a moment in destruction, reducing rampart and wall to grief – together they languish.

Into the ground her gates have sunk, the bars of her fortresses broken into nonexistence; her illuminating kings and leaders are exiled among the nations, so there is no one to light the way; illustrious prophets could not find visions from God.

Judges and elders of Lady Zion sit on the ground in silence, they have strewn dust on their heads, joylessly girding themselves with sackcloth; they lower their heads to the ground, the maidens of Jerusalem.

LADY ZION:

(*seeing SPEAKER 1*)

Knotted up with grief in my tumultuous heart, my eyes are spent with tears, my liver spills on the land over the shattered daughter of my people, as in the city square babies and nursing infants languish away.

Murmuring weakly to their mothers: “where is the bread and wine?” as they faint away like the many wounded in the streets of the city, as their souls leave their bodies, clutched to their mothers’ chests.

LADY ZION moves toward SURVIVOR 1,

but he cannot look at her.

WITNESS catches her eyes as they fall,

reaching out to her in sympathy and empathy,

crying for her until she cracks and they weep in each other’s arms

WITNESS:

Noble Lady Jerusalem, what other misery can I report- equate- compare to yours, to comfort you, O fair Lady Zion? For your devastation is as deep as the ocean – who can heal you?
Prophets prognosticated to you falsehoods and foolishness, and they did not expose your problems in order to set things right; instead they delivered visions of enticing emptiness.
Questioning, "Is this the city that they said was perfect in beauty, joy for all the Earth?", those roving past you on the road clap their hands, hiss, and shake their heads at you.
Rabidly hissing and gnashing their teeth, your enemies hurl hatred at you, saying "We've swallowed her, this is the day of destruction we sought, we found it, we've seen it!"
So the Lord has carried out the plan, carried out the warning that was issued to you in days past, tearing down without compassion, letting the enemy rejoice over you, raising their strength.
Their people's hearts cried out to the Lord – walls of Lady Zion, weep day and night, like a torrent of tears, do not let yourself rest, do not stem the flow from your eyes.
Up, arise, cry out in the night at the beginning of the watch, pour out your heart like water – upon appealing to the Lord, raise your hands to God to beg for for the lives of your babies who, unfed, faint at every street corner.

LADY ZION:

View now, O Lord, with whom You have dealt so severely, such that women eat the fruit of their wombs, their newborns, such that priests and prophets are killed in the Lord's Temple!
Wizened elders and innocent youths lie prostrate on the earth, in the streets, young men and women fell to the sword – You slew them on Your day of wrath, You slaughtered without pity.

You invited my neighbors surrounding me, as if it were a festival day; on the day of God's wrath, You did not allow escape, left none unscathed – all I reared in love, my enemy annihilated with zero hesitation.

SCENE III

WITNESS:

(*crushed and crumbling, struggling to stay with us*)

Affliction beyond comprehension have I borne and witnessed beneath the club of God's wrath – I am the man who has seen it all.

Always onward, God drove me in darkness with no guiding light.

At me alone God's hand turns to strike, ceaselessly.

Bones and flesh are worn away, shattered.

Built all around me, venom and distress.

Below the deepest depths of darkness do I dwell, like the dead.

Closed in, I cannot break out, I am weighed down, fettered.

Cry as I might, pleading, God shuts out my prayers.

Completely cut off in all directions, my path twisted into a labyrinth.

Dangerous as a sleeping bear beside me, such is God, like a lion lying in wait.

Driving me off my path and tearing me to pieces, I am left stunned and scarred.

Directing arrows at me, bow bent.

Entire quivers piercing my kidneys.

Every day, dawn to dusk, I am the subject of their taunts, the laughingstock of all my people.

Eating my fill of bitterness, sated with wormwood.

Front teeth shattered on gravel, trampling me to dust.

Far behind me are my days of peace – I've forgotten what goodness is like.

Fah, I said, my strength has abandoned me- my hope, my faith in the future, comes from God.

Going back, remembering my affliction and anguish was venom and wormwood.

Gravity pulls me down harder, remembering: my soul is bowed low.

Going on, yes, so that I can go on, I remind myself, I take to heart:

How God's kindness is not finished, nor have God's mercies ceased.

How each morning brings renewal, deepening my faith in You.

How my soul cries, "God is my portion!" therefore with God I persevere.

SURVIVOR 2 attempts to comfort WITNESS,

gently pulling him back to the present

and the land of the living

SURVIVOR 2:

Just know: God is good to those who trust, to the soul who seeks the faith.

Just remember: it is good to take refuge in hopeful quiet for God's rescue.

Just think: perhaps it is good for a man to bear a heavy burden while he's still young.

Keeping quietly to himself, accepting what has been set on his shoulders.

Keenly feeling the strain of suffering, he bends until his lips brush the dust – perhaps there is hope.

Knocked about, let him offer his cheek to his attacker, let him be sated with scorn.

Let him see that God does not forsake forever.

Lo, if there is torment, always, endlessly, compassion follows.

Lest you think God longs for our suffering, for the affliction of humanity

Multitudes trampled, all the prisoners of the earth

Mislaying justice to those facing the Most High

Mangling a man in his suit – no, God seeks none of this.

Nevertheless, who could decree destruction outside the divine plan?

Not from the mouth of the Most High comes good and evil, not while there is free will in this world

Now, of what should a person yet living complain? Let each man look to his own misdeeds!

Our own ways, our own paths, those we must examine, and return to God.

Offering our hearts in our hands to God in the heavens.

CHORUS:

(*voices echoing*)

WITNESS and LADY ZION

Owning that we have transgressed and rebelled, and You have not yet forgiven us.

Pursuing us in anger, You struck down without compassion.

SURVIVORS 1 and 2

Prayer may not pass through the cloud in which You enshrouded Yourself.

Placed among the peoples, You dispatched us as filth, refuse.

WITNESS and SURVIVOR 1

Quaking the earth with their cries, our enemies rail against us.

SURVIVOR 2 and LADY ZION

Quivering in fear, we faced devastation and destruction.

LADY ZION:

(*standing up to God, for the sake of her people, her children, her beloved*)

Quell me not, my tears fall like streams over the shattering of my daughters, my people.

Respite nor rest shall I take, weeping ceaselessly.

Raising my reddened eyes to the heavens until God looks down and sees

Ruin runs from my eyes to my soul over all the daughters of my city.

Snared like a songbird by my enemies, hunted without cause.

Snuffing out my life in a pit, striking me with stones.

Sealed, I shriek, my doom is sealed as the water rises over my head.

To You I called, O God, from the depths of the pit.

Turn not away from my voice, my rescue, my cries for help!

True to Your word, You came to me when I called, You told me "Do not fear."

Valiantly, O God, You have fought the battles of my soul, redeemed my life.

Vindicate me, O God, for you have seen the wrongs done to me!

Vitriol, venom, violence, You have beheld all my enemies hurled at me, seen all their designs against me.

Witnessed their taunts, heard all their hateful calculations.

Words and thoughts all turned against me, a wall of hatred hitting me every day.

Working or at rest, see how they taunt me, exacerbating my pain.

Yet now You may repay them in kind, let them choke on their own medicine.

Your curse be upon them, heart hardened.

Yield not as you pursue them in wrath and destroy them, from under God's heavens!

SCENE IV

Sitting shiva together, a family again,
even as they struggle to see each other
through their own clouds of grief

SURVIVOR 1:

Alas! The gold is dulled, even the purest is profaned, and the most precious gems scattered on the street corner.

Beautiful children of Zion, once esteemed greater than gold, alas, now they are cast off like handmade clay pots.

LADY ZION:

Cruelest monsters cleave their young to their breasts, feeding their babes; but the daughters of my people have become brutal as the ostriches who abandon their young in the wilderness.

Dry from thirst, the tongue of the nursling sticks to its palette; toddlers beg for bread, but are given none.

WITNESS:

Even those who once dined on delicacies now wander desolately; those who grew up in garments of scarlet now embrace heaps of refuse.

Fallen further from grace than Sodom has the daughter of my people, it seems, for Sodom was

dealt the mercy of destruction in a single divine strike.

SURVIVOR 1:

Gone are the days of nazirites purer than snow, more lustrous than milk; their essence ruddier than rubies, bodies like sapphire.

Hidden beneath darkness darker than soot, their faces are no longer recognized in the streets; their skin shriveled on their bones, dry as wood.

LADY ZION:

Iron was kinder in its quick dealing of death – those slain by the sword were more fortunate than those who waste away from famine, bellies split in starvation.

Kindhearted women have cooked their own children, such became their fare, the shattered daughter of my people.

SURVIVOR 1:

Lashing out in fury, the Lord poured out wrath and ruin, kindling a fire in Zion, consuming it down to the very foundations stones.

SURVIVOR 2:

Mortal monarchs could not comprehend, nor could the inhabitants of the world believe, that a foe,

an enemy could enter the gates of Jerusalem –

SURVIVOR 1:

Now the impossible has come to pass for the transgressions of her prophets, the trespasses of her priests, who have spilled the blood of the righteous in her midst.

Out in the streets, they wander blindly, so soaked in blood that none could touch them.

People called “Turn away, impurity! Turn away, turn away! Do not touch!” – and so they fled, wandering still, such that the nations wondered how long they could remain.

Quietly raging, God’s face has turned away, scattering them, for they turned their faces away from priests and elders in their time of need.

WITNESS:

Reinforcements will not come, we wait in vain for our deliverance, our eyes on the horizon.

Stalked through our own streets, our doom is nigh – our days are done, for our doom has come.

They chased us through the mountains, swifter than eagles swooping through the sky; they lay in wait in the wilderness and ambushed us.

Under the shade of our king we had hoped to shelter in exile, but he, the anointed one of God, was snared in the traps of our enemies, stealing the breath from our lungs.

SURVIVOR 2:

Victory is yours now, daughter of Edom, so rejoice and revel – but remember, the cup will pass to you, too, and you shall drink of destruction.

Your chastisement is complete, your agony at its end – God will exile you no longer, daughter of Zion; your cruelty will come to light – God will uncover your sins, daughter of Edom.

ACT V

CHORUS:

(*voices echoing, gradually coming together at last*)

O Lord, please remember

What befell us – turn back

And behold our disgrace!

Our homeland has been seized

By strangers, our very homes

Cruelly confiscated

By these colonizers.

Orphans all, fatherless;

Our mothers like widows.

Scavenging for silver

To pay for our own water,

To buy our own wood.

Hounded up to our necks,

Worn weary, given no rest.

We reached out to Egypt

In deep desperation,

Begged bread from Assyria.

Our fathers had transgressed –

They are no more, but still

We suffer their missteps.

(*two voices sync*)

Our world turned upside down,

With no deliverer.

We risk our lives for scraps,

We brave the sharpened sword

Out in the wilderness.

Feverish with famine,

Our skin burns like an oven.

The invaders raped women in Zion,

Maidens in the cities of Judah.

Our princes have been hanged

By their hands, dying slowly

Even elders shown no mercy.

Beneath heavy millstones

Young men buckled, breaking

Youths stumbled, staggered, sank

Under the weight of wood.

No elders at the gates,

The young men sing no more.

(*first voices to reach here repeat previous line until third voice syncs, fourth voice jumps to "woe to us…"*)

Our hearts have ceased to beat

With joy; our festive dance

Has transformed to mourning.

The crown has fallen

From our heads – woe to us,

That we have done wrong!

(*fourth voice repeats "woe…wrong" 3x while beating his chest over his heart, then continues*)

For this, our hearts ache;

For this, our eyes dim with tears:

For Mt. Zion lies bare

Desolate,

Wild foxes prowling

On sacred ground… (*all voices sync*) Yet

We know that You, O God,

Are enthroned eternally –

Your seat of power persists

Generation

To generation.

Why have You forgotten us

So utterly, left us

To these unending days

Of suffering?

Bring us back, O God, to You, and we shall return – renew our days so we may be as we were!

For You rejected us,

In wrath raged against us.

Bring us back, O God, to You, and we shall return – renew our days so we may be as we were!

Shir HaShirim:

Epic Love

CHARACTER BREAKDOWN:

Raaya: The lover, a young woman

Dod: The beloved, a young man

Chorus: Daughters of Jerusalem, the peers of Raaya

At various times: Guards, Bride, Mother, King Solomon

NOTES:

- This is a story of young love
- The title can be translated as both “Song of Songs” and “Poem of Poems.” I think we have both on our hands

Scene I:

A group of young women, all in white, gather to dance.

They gather to dance, to celebrate love – the love of their future partners

and the love they share in community together.

Some carry tambourines and hand drums,

carrying on the song Miriam began on the shores of the Reed Sea.

RAAYA appears on stage, a barefoot figure in white.

The CHORUS gathers around her,

giggling and dreaming with her as she giddily confides in them.

She reads from a journal or scroll in which she's written love poems:

RAAYA:

Kiss me – oh, the kisses of his mouth,

For your love is better than wine.

Your scent is sweet,

Your name like fragrant oils –

That is why maidens love you.

Draw me after you, let us run together!

The king has brought me to his chambers –

DOD appears, as RAAYA sees him, resplendent.

He reaches out to her,

beckoning her into his dreamlike space.

DOD:

Let us exult and rejoice in you!

RAAYA:

Let us revel in the memory of your love,

Savoring it more than wine,

Your true love!

DOD fades away as we return to reality and the present moment.

RAAYA looks in a mirror and addresses the CHORUS:

RAAYA:

I am tanned and comely,

Daughters of Jerusalem,

Like the tents of Kedar, [keh-DARR]

Like the curtains of Solomon.

Do not gape at me because I am tanned,

For the sun has beaten down on me –

My mother's sons scorched me,

They made me guard their vineyards;

So I could not guard my own.

DOD appears, too far away for RAAYA to reach

RAAYA calls to him

RAAYA:

Tell me, you whom my soul loves so,

Where do you graze your sheep?

Where do you rest in the afternoon?

For why should I be bound to the flocks of your friends?

DOD:

If you do not know, fairest of women,

Go out and follow the footprints of the sheep,

And steer your kids toward the tents of the shepherds.

I have likened you to the splendid horses in Pharaoh's chariot.

Your cheeks are comely, decorated with earrings,

Your neck with strings of beads.

We will make you circlets of gold,

With droplets of silver.

RAAYA:

While the king was at his table,

My honeysuckle wafted its fragrance.

To me, my beloved is a pouch of myrrh

Resting between my breasts;

To me, my beloved is a cluster of henna blossoms

From the vineyards of Ein Gedi.

DOD:

Lo, you are beautiful, my dearest,

Oh, you are beautiful,

Your eyes are like doves.

RAAYA:

Lo, you are beautiful, my beloved,

And pleasant, too,

Indeed, our bed is luxuriant.

The beams of our house are cedar;

The rafters, cypress.

SCENE II:

Flashback:

RAAYA daydreams of when she and DOD first connected.

They do not, however, actually touch yet, still kept apart,

divided across the space, but they move together as if they weren't

RAAYA:

I am a rose on the plain,

A lily of the valley.

DOD:

Like a rose betwixt thorns,

Such is my darling among the girls.

They try to conjure each other with their words,

but are still kept physically far apart.

Reciting from her journal/scroll, a poem she wrote for him

RAAYA:

Like an apple tree in the forest,

Such is my beloved among the boys.

I delight to sit in his shade,

And his fruit is sweet in my mouth.

He brought me to the tavern,

Flying his banner of love over us.

Support me with sweet cakes,

Refresh me with apples,

For I am lovesick.

His left hand cradles my head;

His right, embracing me.

RAAYA once again addresses the CHORUS,

grabbing their hands, leaning over their shoulders.

They settle around her on the ground,

a slumber party sharing secrets

RAAYA:

Swear to me, Daughters of Jerusalem,

By gazelles or does of the field,

Do not awaken love until it is truly desired.

The voice of my beloved!

Lo, he comes,

Leaping on the mountains,

Skipping over the hills.

My beloved is like a gazelle or a hart;

Lo, there he stands, behind our wall,

Gazing in the windows,

Peeping through the lattice.

My beloved answered, saying to me:

DOD:

(*in her memory*)

Arise, my darling, my beauty,

And journey forth.

For, behold, the winter has passed,

The rains have come and gone.

The blossoms can be seen across the land,

The time of singing has arrived,

And the voice of the turtledove can be heard in our land.

The sycamores have sprouted green figs,

The grapevines' buds perfume the air;

Arise, my darling, my beauty,

And journey forth.

My dove, in the niche of the rock,

In the shelter of the steeps,

Show me your visage,

Let me hear your voice,

For your voice is sweet,

And your visage is comely.

Catch for us foxes –

The little foxes destroying vineyards –

For our vineyard is blossoming.

RAAYA flops down among the CHORUS

RAAYA:

My beloved is mine,

And I am his,

The shepherd among the roses.

Until the day sputters out

And the shadows flee,

Turn, my beloved,

Like a gazelle or a hart,

On the jagged mountains.

RAAYA lies down to sleep:

SCENE III

A dream ballet.

Perhaps the words are flitting across the walls,

or sung by the CHORUS in such a way that they

live somewhere between sentences and pure sound.

RAAYA, DOD, and all the figures who appear in the dance

are not quite as they truly are:

their edges are smoothed, they glow with beauty

maybe a little too perfect.

RAAYA awakens into her dream.

She sees DOD and runs to him,

but he is gone before she reaches him.

She looks for him.

She ventures out into the night,

the stars becoming the flickering lights of a sleeping city.

She glimpses DOD down a street, but only for a moment,

then another moment down another street,

then another.

Still she seeks him,

growing more desperate,

until she reaches the guardhouse at the edge of town.

She calls up to the guards,

seeking DOD, and they point her onward.

At last, she finds DOD.

She runs to him, as if to jump into his arms,

but their movements remain in the world of dream, abstract,

caught up in an embrace that is not a literal embrace

as the scene changes around them.

RAAYA's mother appears and draws the pair into her house,

giving them her blessing.

The dream begins to change.

DOD and RAAYA's mother are gone.

RAAYA, caught up in the chaos of the change,

turns to the CHORUS.

In a heightened dance form,

she repeats whatever blocking she had in the last scene,

when she asked the CHORUS to swear

not to wake love until it is desired.

A figure shimmers on a desert plain,

the smell of frankincense, myrrh, all sorts of perfumes

fill the space and turn RAAYA's head.

The smokey figure is replaced by KING SOLOMON,

his palace blooming from the desert.

He climbs into his bed as armed soldiers surround it,

turning around to watch for any danger,

and blocking RAAYA out as the darkness deepens,

turning from dreamy to nightmarish.

KING SOLOMON summons beams at each corner of his bed,

a protective canopy thrown across them.

The canopy parts,

revealing a stark contrast to the world outside,

now eerie and threatening.

Inside the canopy, the beams swirl with silver,

the backdrop glows gold,

the bed itself a lush sea of royal purple.

The CHORUS dance inside it with the king,

each sharing a romantic moment with him,

the space growing brighter and brighter

as the CHORUS dance with the king and each other –

it fills with love.

When it's nearly too bright to see,

the CHORUS parts and KING SOLOMON steps out,

resplendent in royal robes

as one member of the CHORUS (playing his mother)

places a crown on his head

and another (playing his bride)

waits for him at the end of the aisle.

RAAYA awakens, truly,

as DOD appears on the opposite end of the space,

eyes trained on her.

Everyone else vanishes around them:

SCENE IV:

DOD:

Lo, you are beautiful, my darling,

Lo, you are beautiful

Your eyes are like doves

Behind your veil,

Your hair is like a flock of goats

Descending from Mount Gilad.

Your teeth are like a flock of ewes

Emerging fresh from the wash,

That are all bearing twins

Full and flourishing.

Like scarlet thread are your lips,

And your words are lovely,

Like a split-open pomegranate are your temples

Beneath your veil.

Like the Tower of David is your neck,

Built for armaments,

A thousand shields hanging on it,

All the shields of the mighty.

Your breasts are like two fawns,

Twins of a gazelle,

Grazing amidst the roses.

Until the day sputters out

And the shadows flee,

I will walk on the mountain of myrrh,

And on the hill of frankincense.

Every bit of you is beautiful, my darling;

Perfect beyond belief.

Come with me from Mount Lebanon, my bride,

From Mount Lebanon, come,

Journey from the peak of Amana,

From the peak of Shenir and Hermon,

From the lions' dens,

From the leopards' hills.

You have taken my heart, my dearest bride,

You have taken my heart with one look from your eyes,

With one pendant upon your neck.

How beautiful is your love, my dearest bride,

How much better it is than wine,

And the scent of your anointing oil better than all the perfumes!

Nectar drips from your lips, my bride,

Milk and honey beneath your tongue,

And the scent of your dress is like the fragrant air of Mount Lebanon.

My dearest bride is a locked garden,

A bolted fountain,

A sealed-away spring.

Your limbs are a pomegranate orchard,

With the most excellent fruits,

Henna and honeysuckle.

Honeysuckle and saffron,

Calamus and cinnamon,

With all the trees of frankincense,

Myrrh and aloe,

With all the best perfumes.

A garden spring,

A well of water alive

And flowing from Mount Lebanon.

RAAYA and DOD move toward one another

RAAYA:

Awake, north wind,

And come, south wind!

Blow over my garden so that its perfume will waft,

Let my beloved come to his garden,

And eat the excellent fruits.

They meet, perhaps fingertips brushing,

but only for a moment as DOD says:

SCENE V

DOD:

I have come to my garden, my dearest bride,

I have gathered my myrrh with my spices,

I have eaten my honeycomb with my honey,

I have drunk my wine with my milk,

(*connecting for a moment with RAAYA, he has awoken to the audience.*

Drunk with passion, a spirit of love overflowing and seeking to share)

Eat, darlings!

Drink and get drunk, lovers!

And with that, DOD is gone again.

RAAYA is in her bed, dreaming. Alone.

DOD's voice echoes through the space,

like a knock at the door

DOD:

Open up,

My dearest,

My darling,

My dove,

My perfect one!

For my head is drenched with dew,

My hair is damp with mist.

RAAYA:

I have already taken off my robe,

Shall I dress again?

I have already washed my feet,

Shall I soil them?

DOD's voice fades,

RAAYA stirs, leaning in to try to hear him.

She rises from her bed,

goes to the door, fingers slipping on the latch.

The scent of myrrh fills the air.

She opens the door, but finds it empty.

She reels, faint.

She looks for him, to no avail.

RAAYA:

My beloved! My beloved!

No answer.

She ventures farther,

walking on and on

until she bumps into watchmen on patrol.

But they are not as they were in the dream:

they catch her, strike her, bruising her,

ripping off her shawl.

She is left alone.

She runs to bring back the CHORUS,

gathering her girls.

RAAYA:

Swear to me, daughters of Jerusalem:

If you find my beloved, tell him I am sick with love.

CHORUS (STROPHE):

How is your beloved better than anyone else's,

O fairest of women?

How is your beloved better than anyone else's,

That you make us swear so?

RAAYA:

(*trying to convince them*)

My beloved is fresh-faced and ruddy,

Standing out as the greatest among the multitudes.

His head is pure gold,

His hair curled,

Black as a raven.

His eyes are like doves by the stream,

Bathed in milk,

Well set.

His cheeks are like perfumed beds

Towers of spices;

His lips roses,

Overflowing with myrrh.

His hands golden rods,

Decorated with aquamarine;

His stomach an ivory slab,

Encrusted with sapphires.

His legs are alabaster pillars,

Set in sockets of gold;

To see him is to gaze upon Mount Lebanon,

The choicest cedars.

His mouth is sweet –

He is all together delightful,

That is my beloved,

That is my darling,

Daughters of Jerusalem.

SCENE VI

CHORUS (ANTISTROPHE):

Where has your beloved gone,

O fairest of women?

Where has your beloved turned?

We will seek him with you.

RAAYA:

My beloved has gone down to his garden,

To the perfumed bed,

To tend the gardens,

And to gather roses.

I am my beloved's,

And my beloved is mine,

The shepherd among the roses.

The CHORUS helps RAAYA primp:

braiding her hair, weaving a flower crown, lending her a shawl, etc

DOD is getting closer

DOD:

You are beautiful, my darling, like Tirtza;

Comely as Jerusalem,

Awesome as bannered legions.

Turn your eyes away,

For they stir up a storm in me!

Your hair is like a flock of goats

Descending from Mount Gilad.

Your teeth are like a flock of ewes

Emerging fresh from the wash,

That are all bearing twins

And there is not a single barren one among them.

Like a split-open pomegranate are your temples

Beneath your veil.

There are sixty queens,

Eighty concubines,

And innumerable maidens;

Only one is my perfect dove,

She is her mother's one and only,

Pure to she that bore her,

Girls bless her when they see her,

Queens and concubines praise her.

Who is she, gazing down upon us like the dawn,

Beautiful as the moon,

Pure and shining as the sun,

Awesome as bannered legions?

I went down to the almond grove,

To see the fresh buds in the valley,

To see the blossoming vines,

The blooming pomegranates.

I did not know it,

But my soul set me off to the races,

Amidst the chariots of noble people.

SCENE VII

The CHORUS picks up a dance together,

They try to bring in RAAYA, building her confidence

CHORUS (STROPHE):

Turn back, turn back,

Maiden of perfection!

Turn back, turn back,

So we may gaze upon you!

CHORUS (ANTISTROPHE):

Why shall you gaze upon the maiden of perfection,

Like two encampments, circling?

DOD's voice provides a score for the dance

DOD:

How beautiful are your feet,

Shod in sandals, o noble daughter!

The curve of your thighs

Is like a bejeweled ornament

In the hands of a master craftsman.

Your navel is a rounded goblet,

Let there be no lack of spiced wine!

Your stomach is a heap of wheat,

Bordered with roses.

Your breasts are like two fawns,

Twins of a gazelle.

Your neck is like an ivory tower,

Your eyes, pools of understanding

By the gates of Bat-Rabbim,

Your nose is like a white tower,

Facing Damascus.

Your head sits atop you like a garden in Carmel, [car-MELL]

And your hair is like purple wool,

Entangling a king in its tresses.

CHORUS (ANTISTROPHE):

How beautiful you are,

And how sweet!

Love, in its delights.

DOD emerges amidst the dance.

RAAYA pushes through the CHORUS to reach him

DOD:

Such is your stature, like the palm,

And your breasts, its lush clusters of dates.

I say, let me climb the palm,

Let me take hold of its branches,

And let your breasts be like bunches of grapes,

The scent of apples in your nose,

And your mouth like the best wine-

RAAYA:

Let it flow right to my beloved,

Gliding over slumbering lips.

I am my beloved's,

And his desire is for me.

Come, my beloved,

Let us go out to the field,

Resting in the villages.

Let us rise at dawn and go to the vineyards,

To see the flowering vines, buds bursting open,

The pomegranates blossoming –

There I will give my love to you.

DOD:

The mandrakes' scent wafts through the air,

And every delicacy waits at our doors,

Old and new –

My beloved, I have hidden them away for you!

RAAYA moves to follow, but DOD is gone

SCENE VIII

RAAYA:

(*deflated, retreating into a journal or scroll to write her poetry*)

If you were my brother,

If you had nursed at my mother's breast,

I could embrace you in public,

And none would scorn me.

I will lead you,

I will bring you to my mother's house,

She who taught me,

I will pour you spiced wine to drink,

The juice of my pomegranate.

(*she addresses the CHORUS/audience*)

His left hand cradles my head;

His right, embracing me.

Swear to me, daughters of Jerusalem,

Do not awaken love until it is truly desired.

The CHORUS pull RAAYA back into a dance,

building from slow, gentle coaxing to playful, earnest glee

CHORUS:

Who is this,

Coming up from the wilderness,

Supported by her beloved?

RAAYA:

Under the apple tree, I woke you;

There your mother labored for you,

There she birthed you.

Set me as a seal upon your heart,

As a seal on your hand,

For love is as powerful as death,

Jealousy as fierce as the grave,

Its sparks, the sparks of fire,

A roaring flame.

A torrent could not quench love,

Nor rivers wash it away;

If a man gave away all his wealth to buy love,

He would be scorned.

CHORUS:

(*as RAAYA's brothers*)

We have a little sister,

Still a child, not yet developed –

What will we do for our sister,

When she is spoken for?

If she be a wall,

We will build a silver battlement upon her;

If she be a door,

We will board her up with cedar.

RAAYA:

I am a wall,

And my breasts are like towers,

Such was I in his eyes,

Finding peace.

CHORUS:

Solomon had a vineyard in Baal Hamon,

He entrusted it to guards –

A man would offer a thousand pieces of silver for its fruit.

RAAYA:

I have my vineyard before me,

Solomon, you can keep the thousand,

And two hundred for the guards of the fruit!

The CHORUS pull DOD in,

the barrier breaking

DOD:

O, you, sitting in the gardens,

Friends listening to your voice,

Let me hear you!

RAAYA:

Hurry, my beloved!

Run like a gazelle

Or a hart on the fragrant hills!

As the dance reaches a crescendo around them,

RAAYA and DOD connect at last.

Their fingers intertwine,

the CHORUS of women weaving and twining around them,

forming their gardens and hills and a path,

through which the lovers dance together

Rut:

Love, Laughter, and Legacy

CHARACTER BREAKDOWN:

ELIMELECH: A wealthy Israelite man, middle aged, husband of Naomi

eh-lee-MEH-lekh

NAOMI: An Israelite woman from the tribe of Judah

neh-oh-ME

MACHLON: Elilmelach and Naomi's older son

makh-LOAN

CHILYON: Elimelech and Naomi's younger son

khil-YOAN

ORPAH: Moabite woman, married to Chilyon

ore-pah

RUT: Moabite woman, married to Machlon

root

BOAZ: Prominent member of the Beit Lekhem community, established, wealthy Israelite man. Somewhat close relative to Elimelech

BOH-ahz

JOE SCHMOE: Slightly nearer relative of Elimelech

CHORUS LEADER

CHORUS: The women and elders of Beit Lekhem

Pronunciation of locations:

Beit Lekhem = bait LEH-khem

Moav = mo-AHV

SCENE I

The following is performed in pantomime/dance

CHORUS

And so it was in the days of the Judges,

When famine struck the land of Israel,

A man from Beit Lekhem, Judah,

Took his wife and two sons off to Moav,

Bringing them to the countryside to dwell.

CHORUS LEADER

The man's name is Elimelech,

His wife's name is Naomi,

And his two sons' names are Machlon and Chilyon,

(though why someone would name their children "sick" and "weak" is lost on me);

They all hailed from Beit Lekhem, Judah,

And all went to stay in the Moabite countryside, fatefully.

CHORUS

For there it was that Elimelech, husband of Naomi, died,

Leaving her and her two sons alone.

The boys were married to Moabite wives:

One named Orpah, the other named Rut.

And still they remained in Moav ten more years:

The rest of Machlon and Chilyon's lives.

CHORUS LEADER

After both Machlon and Chilyon also passed,

(Which might explain their names in retrospect)

Only Naomi remained of the family that left Beit Lekhem,

So she thought it might be time to redirect.

CHORUS

Thus she gathered herself and her daughters-in-law

And set out to return from those fatal fields,

For she had heard talk in Moav

That God had looked after her people –

The famine that drove Elimelech out had at last resolved

CHORUS LEADER

She left the place she had spent the past decade,

Her two daughters-in-law with her,

And set off on the road to return to Judean land

Future far from assured.

Suddenly, NAOMI stops,

the pantomime/dance halting abruptly with her.

She turns to RUT and ORPAH

NAOMI

Go,

Go back to your mothers' houses.

God will be gracious with you,

like you've been with my sons (may their memory be a blessing), and with me.

May God grant you respite in the house of a new husband.

NAOMI kisses each of them goodbye.

Both RUT and ORPAH burst into tears

RUT and ORPAH:

All your blessings will come true

Because we'll return with you to your people.

NAOMI

My girls,

Go back.

Why would you go with me?

Do you think I'm going to have any more sons for you to marry?

Go back, my daughters.

Go,

I'm too old to remarry and have more children;

Even if I had hope,

Even if I got married tonight and had sons right away,

Are you going to wait in hope until they grow up?

Would you commit yourselves to newborns, shutting out the chance of finding a new husband for decades just to preserve this desiccated family tree?

No, my daughters,

My fate is far more bitter than yours

Since the hand of God has struck me down.

The weeping resumes,

this time with ORPAH returning NAOMI's kiss farewell

and turning back, exiting the scene and the story.

NAOMI waits.

RUT remains.

NAOMI starts walking.

RUT walks with her.

NAOMI stops.

RUT stops.

NAOMI

Look, your sister-in-law returned to her nation and her gods.

Go, follow her.

RUT

Don’t push me to abandon you, to turn back and leave you behind.

Wherever you go, I’ll go.

Wherever you stay, I’ll stay.

Your nation is my nation.

Your God is my God.

Wherever you die, I’ll die,

And there I will be buried.

Let this be the will of God:

I swear that nothing but death will separate you and me

RUT’s oath hangs in the air as

NAOMI studies her determined daughter-in-law.

Then, NAOMI extends a hand to RUT.

They walk on together.

The CHORUS returns, transforming the space into Beit Lekhem

CHORUS LEADER

And so off they went on

Together

Until they reached Beit Lekhem,

Where they caused quite a stir:

CHORUS

(*in cannon, spreading outward and through the space until it's buzzing with whispers*)

Whoa, is that Naomi?!

NAOMI

(*when the buzz has reached a crescendo*)

It's not Naomi anymore.

Call me Mara,

Because the Lord has embittered me:

I left with everything and God brought me back with nothing.

Why would you call me Naomi,

When God has made my life anything but "pleasantness" –

The Lord has dealt me nothing but pain.

CHORUS LEADER

With this dramatic entrance,

Naomi, (she's still quite pleasant, outburst aside)

With her daughter-in-law, Rut the Moabite,

Returned to Beit Lekhem from that foreign countryside

Just in time for the barley harvest

And the turning of the tides…

SCENE II

CHORUS

And so Rut's new life began.

Amidst the unrelenting movement of the city,

NAOMI and RUT try to carve out a space for themselves.

In a dance of desperate but harmonious domesticity,

NAOMI patches threadbare clothes, tries to make meals from scraps

RUT scavenges, at the fringes of even the beggars.

The dance repeats, getting harsher and more frantic with each pass.

Each time, the other dancers around them return to some form of safety,

while NAOMI and RUT huddle together without a port in the storm

beyond one another.

Just as they reach a breaking point, the dance shifts,

the dancers all moving in a new direction.

RUT starts to follow, then turns back to NAOMI

CHORUS

See Naomi had a kinsman, a man of valor

From the family of Elimelech,

And his name was Boaz.

RUT

I'll go to the field,

Find someone who will be kind to me,

And collect the grain they drop along the way.

NAOMI

Go, my Ruti.

RUT exits and reenters as the scenes changes to

a series of fields.

In a movement sequence that weaves in ritual,

RUT follows the reapers, picking up the stalks they drop,

winding her way to BOAZ's field.

Suddenly, BOAZ arrives on the scene,

greeting his reapers as he encounters each group (at least 3x):

BOAZ:

God be with you!

REAPERS:

God bless you!

RUT glances over to see what's happening.

BOAZ catches her eye.

It snags. A breath

BOAZ turns to the OVERSEER:

BOAZ:

With whom does this young woman belong?

OVERSEER:

She's that (*derisive*) Moabitess – came back with Naomi from their little famine "trip." She asked me if she could do what the poor people from the community do, following the reapers and collecting whatever's dropped – she actually seems pretty polite. She's been on her feet since this morning – from the start of the day to now, she's only sat down in the hut for maybe a few minutes. I hear she's doing it all for her miserable old mother-in-law.

BOAZ:

(*calling RUT* over)

Listen to me, my dear girl: do not go glean in anyone else's field, do not just pass by here – stick to the women who work for me. Keep your eyes on the field where they are reaping and go after them. I have instructed the young men in my employ not to touch you, so if you are thirsty, go to our vessels and drink from the water they have drawn. You will be well cared for here.

RUT bows to BOAZ,

grateful to be safe and seen

RUT:

What did I do to deserve your kindness, singling me out even though I'm just some foreigner?

BOAZ:

I have been told, often and repeatedly, all that you did for your mother-in-law, after your husband died, how you left your father and mother and the land of your birth, and you went to a nation you did not know the day before yesterday, all to care for a poor widow with nothing left to offer you but love. I know it has not been easy.

(*BOAZ smiles*)

May God repay your deeds, and may your reward be complete from Hashem, God of Israel, as you have come to seek refuge under the wings of the Lord!

RUT:

(*smiling back*)

I hope I find favor in your eyes, truly, sir – you've greatly comforted me. Your words have struck my heart; I'm so touched that someone like you would bother to look out for someone like me.

They both return to work,

RUT more at ease than we've seen her since she was widowed,

stealing glances at BOAZ,

BOAZ glancing at her from his work, checking in wordlessly.

When BOAZ's SERVANTS bring out the midday meal,

BOAZ motions to RUT

BOAZ:

Come join us! Eat some of the bread; here, dip it in the vinegar.

BOAZ proffers the food,

gestures to the seat of honor next to him,

and RUT comes to sit with him and the REAPERS,

eating a full meal for what is clearly the first time in a while.

The group passes the meal happily in each other's company,

and when they finish, RUT even has food left over,

which BOAZ has packed away for her to take with her.

The REAPERS and RUT return to the field,

but BOAZ stops his OVERSEERS.

BOAZ:

When she gleans, you are not only to let her without bothering her, but also take some stalks from your bundles and leave them for her to glean, and do not, under any circumstances, make her feel unwelcome.

The dance of gleaning resumes as the sun goes down.

RUT gathers all she has gleaned and beats the barley,

then she gets up and returns to the city, the scene shifting around her,

the ritual of reaping replaced by the bustling dance of the city.

NAOMI sees her and starts, shocked by how much RUT gathered,

her surprise mounting when RUT hands her the food she brought back from the midday meal as well.

NAOMI:

Where were you gleaning today? Where did you accomplish all this? Blessed be whoever noticed you to make this happen!

The WOMEN OF BEIT LEKHEM reform the CHORUS, creating the chain of information of a close-knit community, retelling the day's events as RUT explains everything to NAOMI, the chatter reaching its crescendo when it suddenly cuts off for RUT to deliver the final surprise:

RUT:

And the man's name is Boaz.

NAOMI:

Blessed be he to God, who has not abandoned compassion, for the living and for the dead! (*embracing RUT*)

That man is our kin – he's a redeemer! The same blood flows through his veins as did through my sons; he is kin close enough to perform the levirate marriage, to continue the line of your husband and my son alive, for you two together to carry forward the spirit of the family. With

him, you can once again have a place in society, the ground of our family lands beneath your feet, roof of our family home over your head. And a child of our family to pass the torch onward.

RUT:

He also told me (*doing her best Boaz impression*) "stay close to my workers, stick to them until they have finished harvesting all of my crops-"

NAOMI:

Good, good. My Ruti, stay with the women who work for him, don't bother with any other fields.

CHORUS:

(*telling each other and the audience as the movement repeats, the dance of the reapers with RUT joining their ranks, gradually going from clumsily following along to flowing with them*)

So Rut stuck like glue

To the women reaping for Boaz,

Returning day after day to glean

Until the barley and wheat harvests were done,

Returning at the end of each day to her mother-in-law,

Bearing the fruits of her labor…

SCENE III

NAOMI:

My Ruti, can I help you find a real home, somewhere you can safely rest, somewhere that'll be good for you? A real place in the community, a real family. (*RUT moves to speak, but NOAMI presses on*)

Listen, Boaz is our kin; you know, the one whose maidservants you've been close to? Well, he'll be out on the threshing floor winnowing barley tonight…

(*Beat. NAOMI gives RUT a Look. RUT gets it*)

Go, wash up and anoint yourself in fragrant oils and put on a nice dress and get down to the threshing floor – but don't let him know who you are until he's done eating and drinking. When he lies down – which he will – memorize where he is; go over there and uncover his (*pause*) feet, and lay down – he'll let you know what to do from there.

RUT:

Whatever you say. I'll do it.

NAOMI helps RUT prepare,

braiding her hair, straightening her clothes, anointing her with oil –

a mother preparing her daughter for her wedding,

a prophet crowning a king.

RUT grasps NAOMI's hand then walks down,

the scene changing around her to the threshing floor,

BOAZ sitting alone with the grain.

RUT follows NAOMI's instructions precisely,

like a dancer performing a carefully-choreographed dance.

When BOAZ finishes eating and drinking,

he smiles warmly, sighing contentedly as he goes over to the grain pile,

the result of not just tonight's work, but the season's harvest –

he's old enough to remember the famine that sent NAOMI and her family

to MOAV, after all.

He lies down by the pile.

RUT tiptoes over, carefully pulling back part of his robe and laying down by his feet,

partially hidden from sight.

Music –

Time passes, stars shine as the moon travels across the sky.

A breeze wafts through the threshing floor.

BOAZ bolts upright.

BOAZ:

(*seeing a figure at his feet*)

Who are you?

RUT:

(*looking up at him. When their eyes meet, the air crackles with something more than recognition*)

It's Rut, your maidservant.

(*she moves closer to him*)

You've already been so generous with me, too generous. (*silencing his objection*) I knew no one but Naomi when I came here. I had no family, no friends, nowhere to turn and no place here. You saw me, not just the widowed stranger. And I think I see you, too. They're right to call you a man of valor. Take me under your wing, for you are my redeemer, in more ways than one.

BOAZ closes the distance between them so that they are side by side.

He spreads his robe over her, like a bird shielding its mate with its wing.

BOAZ:

God bless you, my dear girl. Your goodness shines greater with each act; you could have had any number of young men, rich and poor. You are admired by all, and rightly so, yet you choose me. Now, my dearest, do not be afraid. Whatever you ask, I will do for you. The very elders of the town know that you are, truly, a woman of valor!

(*BOAZ shifts but does not move away from RUT*)

There is just one problem: while it is true that I am a potential redeemer, legally speaking there is one kinsman more closely related who would thus be first in line.

RUT:

But-

BOAZ reads RUT's reaction.

He wraps the robe around her entirely.

BOAZ:

Worry not – rest here tonight, and in the morning, if the other man will redeem you then (*his voice rises in pitch, betraying him*) good, then you'll be redeemed, you'll be secure and that is what matters most. But if he won't, I swear by God, I will in a heartbeat. Rest now, stay here with me until morning.

They lie back, conscious of their proximity,

live wires, each intensely aware of what they want and how, mere hours from now,

another person's whim could come between them

or bridge the last bit of distance keeping them apart.

Music –

Dawn breaks, but just barely.

BOAZ helps RUT to her feet.

BOAZ:

Go, my love, before it's light enough for anyone to see your face. We don't want people starting rumors about you coming to the threshing floor…

As RUT prepares to depart, BOAZ stops her.

BOAZ:

Hold out your shawl.

She looks at him and holds it out.

He carefully measures out the freshly-threshed barley,

pouring just the right amount to fill the shawl.

He helps her strap it comfortably to her back, squeezing her shoulder gently,

encouragingly. Their eyes meet once more,

then she sets off without another word spoken;

perhaps because none are needed.

The scene changes as the sun rises and RUT returns to NAOMI's house.

NAOMI:

(*smiling at the still partially-concealed RUT arriving at her door with a shawl full of barley*)

Why, who are you, dear girl?

RUT raises her head, returns NAOMI's smile,

Ruth begins to tell her all that had passed that night.

Music as the past becomes a story.

RUT:

And he gave me this barley, insisting (*she does a BOAZ impression. It could be silly, giddy, maybe a little lovingly mischievous*) "Don't go back to your mother-in-law empty handed!"

NAOMI:

(*taking RUT's hand and leading her to a chair*)

Sit here, my Ruti, we'll wait together for word on how things go.

I tell you, that man won't rest – he'll settle the matter today!

SCENE IV

As NAOMI's words echo in the space,

the scene shifts to the gates of the city, following BOAZ.

He takes up his vigil, positioning himself so that

he can see anyone entering or exiting or even just passing by,

among the crowd of the city's elders/leaders (played by members of the CHORUS)

who gather there to discuss

local issues and the people coming to petition them,

as well as those who pass through and stop by for personal or professional business.

In time, JOE SCHMOE enters, crossing.

BOAZ calls out to him:

BOAZ:

Over here! Come sit down, Joe Schmoe.

JOE SCHMOE diverts from his path and sits by BOAZ.

BOAZ motions for him to stay there,

then goes to gather an impromptu court,

bringing over ten of the city elders/leaders.

Gesturing to the spot opposite himself and JOE SCHMOE:

BOAZ:

Please, take a seat.

They sit

BOAZ:

(*to JOE SCHMOE*)

Naomi wishes to sell the piece of land once owned by our kinsman Elimelech. I said I would tell you about it, let you know in front of witnesses and the elders gathered here so that you have the opportunity to officially acquire it, if you wish. If you want to redeem it, redeem; if not, tell me – I need to know. There's no one who takes precedence over you in the line of redemption, and I come after you.

JOE SCHMOE:

I'll redeem, I'll buy the land, sure.

BOAZ:

Just so you know, on the day you buy the field from Naomi and Rut the Moabite, you also take responsibility for the wife of the deceased, preserving our late kinsman's name, his legacy, on his ancestral land.

JOE SCHMOE:

Oh…Actually, then, strike that, I can't actually be in charge of the whole redeeming thing – I don't want to muddle my actual inheritance by getting it mixed up in all this…you know. You go ahead and move up the line, I concede the right of redemption to you. Can't do it, nope.

CHORUS:

(*to the audience*)

It was the practice in Israel,

In such cases,

To seal such a transfer,

For one man to remove his shoe

And give it to the other.

(*to BOAZ and JOE SCHMOE, back in the moment of the action*)

This is how it is done in Israel.

JOE SCHMOE:

(*taking off his shoe*)

Buy the land for yourself.

BOAZ:

(*accepting the shoe, addressing the elders and all assembled at the gates*)

You are all witnesses today – I have purchased from Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech as well as all that belonged to his sons, Machlon and Chilyon. As such, I also take responsibility for Rut the Moabite, wife of Machlon – I contract myself to marry her and preserve the legacy of her late husband in his land; I will ensure that the memory of the dead will not be cut off from his

kin nor will his name cease to be spoken at the gates of his hometown. You all bear witness to this oath today.

CHORUS:

We are witnesses!

May this woman now joining your house

Be like Rachel and Leah,

Who built the House of Israel!

Be valiant together in Efrat,

And may your name be remembered and celebrated in Beit Lekhem!

May your house be like the House of Perez, [PEH-retz]

Born to Tamar and Yehudah,

Through the descendants God gives you

Through this exceptional young woman.

Scene changes as BOAZ runs to RUT

and takes her in his arms.

The following is played out in a pantomime/dance:

CHORUS LEADER:

And so Boaz wed Rut,

And sealed their union,

And God granted her pregnancy,

And she bore a son.

The women of Beit Lekhem said:

CHORUS:

(*as the women of Beit Lekhem, to NAOMI*)

Blessed be God,

Who certainly did not neglect you in your need for a redeemer!

May this child's name be celebrated in Israel!

He will renew your spirit,

Nourish your soul as you go gray,

For he was born to your daughter-in-law,

Whom you love so much,

And she has been better to you than seven sons.

CHORUS LEADER:

Naomi took the baby boy

And held to him tight;

She became a second mother to him.

The neighbors declared at the sight:

CHORUS:

(*as the women of Beit Lekhem*)

Naomi has had a son!

CHORUS LEADER:

And they named him Oved, [oh-VEHD]

The same Oved who would become

The father of Yishai, who grew up to be [yee-SHY]

(Now watch this outcome)

The father of David, the king-

Music.

The new little family of

NAOMI, RUT, BOAZ, and OVED

bask in each other's warmth

as the house they built

through persistent, unflinching, wise and brave love

is enumerated and celebrated:

CHORUS:

Wait, go back –

Starting from Perez,

Son of Yehudah,

Here's the family line,

Heir to heir:

Perez begot Chetzron, [khetz-ROWN]

Chetzron begot Ram, [rahm]

Ram begot Aminadav, [ah-me-nah-DAHV]

Aminadav begot Nachshon, [nakh-SHOWN]

Nachshon begot Salma,

Salma begot Boaz,

Boaz begot Oved,

Oved begot Yishai,

Yishai begot David.

Thus began

The Royal House of David!

Conclusion

Through the translation process, I have been able to actively test my theories on the ground. With the invaluable support of the Katzin and Gumpel Fellowships, I was able to arrange a workshop and explorative discussions of my work with other Jewish scholars, artists, and laypeople, which have affirmed the power of these pairings (the texts and their traditions on stage) to make these texts feel immediate, intimate, and connected to current Jewish experiences in ways not felt when the *Megillot* are approached as stagnant books merely to be read. In preparation for this workshop, I collaborated with Jewish poets, playwrights, and dramaturgs who offered their own unique insights, based on their overlapping areas of expertise in Judaism and art, on the theatrical applications and adaptation of both texts and practices. This collaborative process continued through rehearsals, in which my production team and cast all came from different types of Jewish backgrounds and brought their own relationships to the *Megillot* and holy-days into the room. The staged reading and following talkback invited further diverse voices into the conversation.

Through questions devised in collaboration with my dramaturg as well as open discussion, certain threads emerged. These included a connection felt between the staged *Megillot* and both historical performances and modern theatre. The performed translations were compared to Athenian comedies and tragedies, medieval morality plays, Shakespeare, British panto, dream ballets, choreopoems, and opera, among others. This not only supports my argument regarding the performance potential of the pairings of *Megillot* and embodied practices, but also the way in which theatre as a medium allows for multiple avenues for connection.

This was further highlighted in the relevance my collaborators, audiences, and subsequent readers saw for these theatricalized translations today. Through this staged reading, the continued pertinence of the *Esther* story and its continued re-membering in the ongoing Second Diaspora become strikingly legible. *Eicha* and the immersive *shiva*/*Tisha B'Av* practices we incorporated into the performance drew tears and connections to the rising tide of antisemitic violence over the past decade, particularly the massacres and kidnapping of Israeli civilians and soldiers on October 7, 2023, the worst attack targeting Jews since the Holocaust. Following the feelings and memories evoked in *Eicha*, many commented on the need for the celebration of romantic love in *Shir HaShirim* and chosen familial love in *Rut*. I received feedback that these impacts were made possible and connections viscerally legible via the specific performance reframing, which also made clear the layered histories carried through *Rut* and *Shavuot*, the youthfulness and futurity infused in *Shir HaShirim* and its pair of festivals, the critical role of community for the combination of *Eicha* and *Tisha B'Av*, and the potent power of the balance of interactive comedy and fear in *Esther* and *Purim*. Putting the translations together in a theatrical cycle allowed audiences to see the ways in which they echo throughout each other – musically, physically, and literarily. It also made their words and affects more accessible, more immediate, and more clearly connected to the collapsed-together past, present, and future in service of Jewish identity and community.

The four *Megillot* in question and their corresponding holy-days are demonstrably, deeply embedded with embodiment, making them ideal sites for reframing through a performance lens. Judaism is built upon re-membering, and *Purim*, *Tisha B'Av*, *Pesach*, *Tu B'Av*, and *Shavuot* exemplify the immersive, temporality-collapsing, continuity- and unity-fascilitating capabilities of Jewish re-enactment practices. The very practices involved in reading the *Megillot* in

community, such as *trop* and call-and-response, can be viewed as performance acts. Placing the *Megillot* in their calendar contexts on top of their multiple historical and mythical contexts, further draws out the layers of embodiment involved in the entanglement of texts and practices and their affective impacts. The *Megillot* themselves are packed with performance, from speech acts to stage directions, stylizations of the body and poetic structures of the lines. The titular heroines of *Esther* and *Rut* actively engage in layered performances of femininity, cultivated around their host cultures and desired roles within said societies, while Lady Zion and the Raaya emerge from this analysis as the archetypal Mother and Maiden, comforting the Jewish people for past traumas and offering hope for the future. All of these performances situate their performed bodies as sites for Jewish identity formation and survivance.

The bodies of those immersing in the practices surrounding these *Megillot* are, in turn, transported into the heterotopic space of the carnivalesque, further unified by the suspension of societal rules in order to examine what can be taken back to improve the collective when they return together from that liminal existence. Understanding the power of re-membering through these *Megillot* and their holy-days requires weaving together threads of Jewish history via texts that emerged after the First Diaspora and the traditions that have amassed around them across the centuries. Approaching these texts and their contexts together through the lens of performance provides road maps and methods for the formulation, reconfiguring, and reification of collective identity, facilitating not only unity in the face of fragmentation and survival through crisis, but a path forward to a brighter future in which hope does not feel quite so topsy turvy.

My approach can also bring the power of the *Megillot* into the rest of the year, bridging beyond the holy-days to combat the pitfall of the carnivalesque's containment to the given festival, which is a danger in terms of how they holy-days are currently observed, with even the

study of the *Megillot* tending to be scheduled around the holy-days on curricula. Engaging with the theatrical potential of the *Megillot* and their surrounding practices not only activates their affective power more viscerally around their holy-days; it also offers a means of keeping their impact alive and accessible throughout the year.

Through my unique intervention in mixing the methodology of performance and Jewish studies; adaptation/translation into this format; and, especially, connecting these texts with their traditions, holy-days, and rituals, the performative potential of the *Megillot* and their holy-days coalesces into a clear vision of a powerful tool for the global Jewish community and beyond. They can provide new perceptions of Jewish tradition and culture for people across the spectrum of familiarity, hand the reins of stories centering female figures to female performers, allow new access for Jews not fluent in Hebrew, and breathe new, visceral life into texts that have lost their impact through repeated exposure in only one format.

Esther, *Eicha*, *Shir HaShirim*, and *Rut* emerged from moments of crisis in Jewish history, both within their narratives and in their earliest recorded appearances as texts in the biblical canon. Analyzing and recontextualizing cultural practices from across time and diasporic communities and combining them with a translation and analysis of these texts through a performance studies lens re-enlivens the texts and their power in crisis. This can help bridge the disparate diasporic communities, bring our history to embodied life, combat stereotypes by showcasing the diversity of the global Jewish community, and assert our seat at the table in the world of performance studies by harnessing the power of art in historiography. The potential of these paired texts and practices to unite, inspire, and guide Jewish communities in moments of crisis has become increasingly relevant in recent years, and I hope that my work can provide communities with a new resource crafted from our long and (literally) storied history. For those

outside the Jewish world, my work can provide a perspective that differs from the images commonly put forth in contemporary popular culture; this would support a view of Jews as both homogenous in terms of shared history and heterogenous in the variety of diasporic communities and their traditions, challenging the Ashkenormative view, supporting Jewish indigeneity, and offering a glimpse into the many faces of Jewishness.

This work teases out many threads of Jewish history and weaves them together in a tapestry that can be actively, affectively engaged and applied to aid us in the current chapter of the Jewish story. I intend to circulate and stage these translations in more Jewish communities, in addition to publishing and circulating the analytical chapters with the translations to allow the intended internal and external access and understanding. I seek to use performance to offer new answers to the question of what it means to observe the commandment of retelling our history "as if you were there."[488] Theatrical reinterpretation can revive and amplify the power of the *Megillot* and their holy-days for the present moment, using all of the stacked affect and answers they provided through their deeply embodied past.

[488] This phrase comes from a line repeated in the *Hagaddah* as a reason for engaging in the practices of *Pesach*, a motivation for the re-membering of the Jewish holy-days.

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