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# Ben-Oni and Binyamin: The Two Names of Suffering

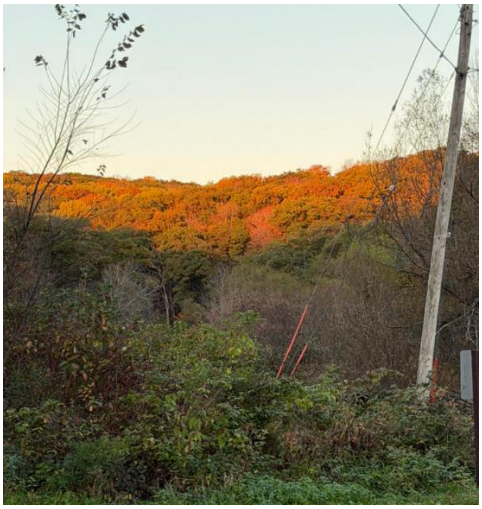
## Rachel's Dying Testimony, the Theology of Divine Absence, and the Moral Impossibility of Redemptive Suffering

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**Abstract:** Genesis 35:18 records two names for one child. Rachel, dying in childbirth on the road to Ephrath, calls her son Ben-Oni, “son of my sorrow”; Jacob renames him Binyamin. This essay reads the two names as two irreducible theological languages, testimony and futurity, and argues that neither may be allowed to silence the other. Drawing on the double sense of the Hebrew ʾon (sorrow and vigor), on Jeremiah’s Rachel who refuses to be comforted, and on the rabbinic tradition that gives her the decisive word in an argument with God, it contends that religious hope becomes ethical only when it remains answerable to the sufferer’s own account. The argument engages Job, Lurianic Kabbalah, Adorno, Levinas and Arthur Frank. It then turns to the author’s poem “In the Dying of the Leaves,” whose autumnal imagery is undone by the memory of the Shoah, and to the physician’s obligation not to rename a patient’s pain as providence. The essay is preceded by the poem “In the Dying of Mama Rachel” and followed by two addenda. Addendum II surveys ancient, rabbinic, medieval, Kabbalistic and modern interpretations of the naming of Benjamin, among them Rashi, Ramban, Radak, Bekhor Shor, the Netziv, Elchanan Samet, Jonathan Sacks and Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg. It shows that the tradition already divides between readings in which Jacob’s name cancels, translates or preserves Rachel’s. Addendum I presents, in Hebrew and English, the forty-two biblical, talmudic, midrashic and targumic sources (S1–S42) on which the poem and essay draw.

**Keywords:** Ben-Oni, Binyamin, Rachel, Genesis 35, Jeremiah 31, refusal of consolation, theodicy, redemptive suffering, Eichah Rabbah, midrash, Ramban, Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, Shekhinah, tikkun, Holocaust and poetry, Levinas, illness narrative, medical ethics



***Devil Lake WI Oct 2026***

*In the Dying of  Mama Rachel*

*All her life they spoke of her beauty,*
*yefat to'ar, yefat mar'eh,*
*the green of her that Jacob saw at the well*
*and wept and rolled the stone away for.*

*Seven years that seemed to him a few days.*
*It seemed this would last forever.*

*But beauty is chlorophyll.*
*It feeds the tree and hides the leaf.*

*No one saw the night she lay beneath the bed*
*answering in her own voice for her sister*
*so Leah would not be shamed beneath the veil.*

*She gave away the signs. She gave away the night.*
*That color was in her all along,*
*waiting for a gray sky to be seen.*

*On the road to Ephrat the morning wind turns cold.*
*Do not fear, the midwife says, this one too is a son.*
*And she names him from the bottom of her last breath,*
*Ben-oni, son of my sorrow,*
*and her husband, who cannot bear the name, unsays it.*

*Was it his own word that killed her,*
*the curse he swore over the stolen teraphim,*
*not knowing whose saddle hid them?*

*He does not carry her to Machpelah*
*to lie among the fathers.*
*He leaves her by the road,*
*a grave without a city,*
*as if he knew*
*that a thousand years on, her children would come this way*
*in chains toward Babylon*
*and need someone to weep for them.*

*Kol be-Ramah nishma.*
*The fathers had gone up first,*
*Abraham with his knife laid down,*
*Isaac with his offered throat,*
*Jacob with his twenty winters of frost among the sheep,*
*and Moses with his forty years of sand,*
*each pleading his merit at the gate.*

*The gate stayed shut.*
*Heaven said nothing.*

*Then a woman from the roadside,*
*who never sat at the head of anything,*
*lifts her voice.*
*She does not plead merit. She argues.*

*I am flesh and blood, dust and ash,*
*and I brought my rival into my own wedding night*
*and was not jealous.*
*And You, living King, eternal, merciful,*
*are You jealous of idols that are nothing,*
*wood and stone with no breath in them,*
*that for their sake You send my children into exile?*
*I hid such things under a saddle once.*
*They were not worth a sister's shame.*

*Me'anah le-hinachem.*
*She refuses to be comforted.*
*Not grief alone, but refusal:*
*a woman who will not let God's silence*
*be the last word spoken over her children.*

*And in the dying of Rachel her true colors are revealed.*
*Not the green the shepherd loved,*
*but red,*
*red that was never hidden underneath*
*but made in the letting go,*
*the color a leaf makes only as it falls.*



*And the Holy One, Who held His peace before the fathers,*
*breaks it for her:*
*For your sake, Rachel.*
*Refrain your voice from weeping,*

*your eyes from tears.*
*There is reward for your work.*
*The children will return to their own border.*

*Still, on the road between Jerusalem and Hebron,*
*she has not refrained.*
*Someone must keep weeping*
*until the last of them comes home.*

*Sources for the poem: S1–S4, S7–S10, S13, S15, S17, S21–S22, S30, S35–S40 (see Addendum I).*



**The Death of Rachel after the birth of Benjamin, Gustav Ferdinand Metz c. 1847**

The Bible permits a dying mother to name the world according to what it has done to her. In Genesis 35 [S10], Rachel, giving birth on the road to Ephrath, calls her newborn Ben-Oni. Jacob renames him Binyamin. These are not merely alternate names for one child. They are two propositions about suffering, spoken from radically unequal positions: the mother who will not survive the birth and the father who must bring the child into a future she will never see. The first name insists that pain be remembered; the second insists that life cannot be confined to the catastrophe that accompanies it. The profound theological difficulty is not deciding which name is right. It is asking whether hope can be spoken without silencing the sufferer, and whether fidelity to suffering can be sustained without forbidding the future [1].

Genesis is unusually compressed at this moment. The narrator reports hard labor, the midwife's reassurance that Rachel has another son, the departure of Rachel's soul as she dies, the name she gives him, and Jacob's replacement of it. Then comes the burial beside the road and Jacob's monument [S13, S38, S39]. The story leaves no speech of comfort from God, no explanation for Rachel's death, and no invitation to regard its timing as the necessary price of Israel's completion. Indeed, the promise of the child becomes inseparable from the withdrawal of the one who most desired him. The family acquires a son, but the narrative does not allow the gain to cancel the loss [1].

The philology of Ben-Oni deepens this dilemma. In context, 'son of my sorrow' is the obvious reading: Rachel names the child in the instant of her fatal labor. Yet Hebrew ʾon can also suggest vigor, potency, or strength, as in Jacob's language about Reuben, 'the first fruits of my strength' (Genesis 49:3) [S14, S20]. The lexical ambiguity makes the name more, not less, tragic. Her final utterance might bear the weight of both travail and power: the woman whose life is extinguished exercises her last authority in naming. Jacob's Binyamin, traditionally rendered 'son of the right hand,' speaks of favor, power, or an honored position; biblical geography has also invited the suggestion 'son of the south' [S23, S41]. These interpretive possibilities must not be collapsed into the claim that either parent secretly meant the same thing [1–3].

The ethical asymmetry is decisive. Rachel speaks from inside the wound; Jacob speaks after it. She has experiential authority over her dying, while he has responsibility for the living child. To call his act a simple correction would grant the survivor authority to edit the victim's testimony. To condemn every act of renaming, however, would imply that Benjamin's only identity must remain a monument to his mother's death. The text stages the collision but does not adjudicate it. I understand Ben-Oni and Binyamin as two indispensable yet noninterchangeable theological languages: testimony and futurity. Their irreducibility is precisely what prevents a cheap theodicy [1,2].

There is an old and persistent temptation in religious language to transform tragedy into a curriculum. One is told that suffering refines, elevates, cleanses, or uncovers spiritual strength. Such claims can sometimes be uttered by sufferers about their own experience. They become morally dangerous when an observer imposes them on the afflicted. The difference is between a first-person witness who discovers meaning amid damage and a third-person interpreter who claims to know why the damage was necessary. Job's friends commit this latter offense with remarkable theological sophistication [S24, S33]. Job's final encounter with God does not provide a causal explanation of his losses; the divine speeches unsettle the demand that all suffering be fitted into a transparent moral economy [4; S25, S26].

The sequence of Jacob's household complicates our customary account of redemption. Rachel, who has endured infertility and rivalry, finally receives the second son whose birth kills her [S5, S6]. The narrative refuses the structure of a neatly redeemed story. That she gives life while losing her own does not license us to declare the exchange justified. Her dying voice is an accusation against any theology that calculates a net blessing and thereby declares a human life expendable. Ben-Oni therefore names more than personal grief: it names the moral remainder that persists after religious arithmetic has done its work [1,4].

The later prophetic tradition unexpectedly restores to Rachel the authority that the patriarchal renaming might seem to remove. In Jeremiah, Rachel is heard weeping for her children; she refuses consolation because they are not [S21, S35]. The Lord's response does not correct her account of the absence. It addresses her grief and announces the possibility of return. The refusal of consolation and the promise of return stand next to one another without becoming equivalent. Rachel speaks the truth of the missing; prophetic hope speaks to a history that remains unfinished [5]. This is an extraordinary scriptural precedent for the coexistence of Ben-Oni and Binyamin. The tears are neither embarrassment nor obstacle to faith. They are part of its vocabulary.

The rabbinic and mystical traditions allow Rachel's singular grief to expand into a communal emblem, though one should distinguish the biblical text from later theological development. Rachel's mourning becomes a way of thinking about Israel in exile; the suffering presence of the Shekhinah becomes a mystical idiom for divine nearness amid collective fracture [S27, S28]. The Lurianic language of shevirat ha-kelim, the breaking of the vessels, and tikkun, their repair, is a historically specific metaphysical system rather than an explanation supplied by Genesis. Yet it helps us imagine a cosmos in which rupture is not simply concealed beneath order and repair demands human participation. Scholem's account of Lurianic Kabbalah shows how exile and cosmic disruption became structural features of its religious imagination [6].

I nevertheless resist turning the broken vessels into a metaphysical excuse for actual broken bodies. A cosmology of fracture becomes cruel if it assures a bereaved parent that the death of her child was required for the world's restoration. The theological power of tikkun is not that it makes suffering necessary; it is that it makes responsibility unavoidable. Divine hiddenness may provide a grammar for mourning [S29], but should never be allowed to supply evidence that the suffering was deserved or cosmically efficient. Ben-Oni remains the objection to every overconfident application of Binyamin.

This problem returns with terrible intensity in my poem “In the Dying of the Leaves.” The poem begins in seasonal luminosity: golden leaves, autumnal transformation, the visually dazzling disclosure of colors ordinarily hidden by chlorophyll. It is tempting to read this as a lyrical allegory of spiritual gain through dying. One of its central lines declares that 'only in the dying of the leaves do / their true colors become revealed' [7]. Were the poem to stop here, a consolatory theology of mortality might seem plausible: the dying leaf displays the hidden truth of its life. But the poem deliberately destroys the innocence of that aesthetic conclusion.

The same wind that produces the autumn spectacle becomes the wind carrying crematoria ashes over Europe. The colors of the painter's paradise become a vocabulary for collective atrocity. Its final image substitutes victims' tears for the artist's paint. This turn is not a decorative Holocaust reference appended to nature poetry. It is an indictment of the ease with which beauty, cultivation, and technical ingenuity can coexist with mass murder. The very language that earlier made the leaves' death appear revelatory is placed under unbearable moral pressure. What does it mean to say that 'true colors' emerge in dying when the death in question is inflicted by persecutors [7]?

I now read that question through Rachel's two names. The first movement of the poem gestures toward Binyamin: a future, a disclosure, a splendor that apparently survives diminution. Its second movement forces us to hear Ben-Oni: the dead must not be transformed into materials for our consoling insight. Any assertion that the victims' suffering disclosed their nobility risks making their destruction instrumentally useful to observers. The poem refuses this appropriation by allowing the brush to become a tool of accusation rather than artistic resolution. The problem is not whether moral courage sometimes becomes visible under persecution. It is whether that visibility could ever justify persecution. It cannot.

Theodor Adorno's reflections on culture after Auschwitz challenge the belief that inherited aesthetic languages emerge from historical catastrophe unchanged. His famous provocation concerning poetry after Auschwitz was not simply a prohibition of all

subsequent poetic speech; his later writings deepen the demand that suffering retain a voice rather than become reconciled by art [8]. My poem inhabits that difficulty. Its two movements turn the reader from visual pleasure toward a historical reality that resists aesthetic consumption. There can be no innocent Persian rug of suffering. When atrocity becomes pattern, beauty threatens to betray the particular dead.

Emmanuel Levinas sharpens the moral stakes in his essay on useless suffering. Rather than constructing a rationale that redeems another person's agony, he places ethical obligation before theoretical satisfaction: the other's suffering summons my responsibility, whereas explanations risk becoming justifications [9]. This is a philosophical formulation of what I mean by protecting Rachel's naming authority. The sufferer may speak of meaning; I am first required to listen, respond, and prevent avoidable harm. The stranger who renames her suffering as providence may intend comfort, yet the comfort can exact the price of erasing her testimony.

The physician encounters this problem in an especially unforgiving form. I may hope for recovery, draw upon clinical experience, and attempt to sustain the patient through an uncertain prognosis. Yet my professional confidence cannot claim sovereignty over the patient's account of pain. A patient who says 'this is unbearable' has spoken a truth that is not refuted by my optimism. The therapeutic parallel to Ben-Oni and Binyamin is not despair versus cure but witness versus projection. Clinical compassion requires the capacity to hold the patient's suffering as real while offering concrete possibilities that are not guaranteed. Arthur Frank's account of illness narratives is instructive here: a person's experience is not reducible to the restorative plot that caregivers prefer to hear [10].

Even the language of resilience requires restraint. There are lives in which trauma generates wisdom, solidarity, or religious transformation. But resilience cannot be demanded retroactively as proof that the wound was good [S32]. The most destructive theological sentence is often delivered in an encouraging tone: 'This happened so that you could become who you are.' Rachel, dying on the road, has not authorized that explanation. Nor have those carried away in the wind of the crematoria. What may arise after suffering is not the reason suffering occurred. This distinction is both morally elementary and persistently neglected. There is, finally, a subtle difference between Jacob's action and the work of responsible memory. Jacob's name is what the child thereafter bears; Rachel's name remains preserved by the Torah [S10, S34]. Scripture does not delete Ben-Oni merely because history proceeds under Binyamin. The very survival of her utterance is an act of resistance to its erasure. The text remembers the counter-name. In that textual doubleness I find the most rigorous form of hope: not the declaration that grief has been superseded, but the insistence that future life must remain answerable to what it cannot repair [1].

Jeremiah's Rachel and Genesis's Rachel therefore give us a theology neither of pure negation nor of completed reconciliation. The wounded mother may refuse consolation, and yet the future may still make a claim upon us. The danger is to reverse the order and allow the future to govern what the wounded mother was permitted to say. We should hear Ben-Oni first. Only then can Binyamin become an ethical rather than triumphalist name. The right hand must not close over the mouth that named sorrow.

The dying leaves have their brief, astonishing colors, but the poem will not allow autumn to stand as an uncomplicated allegory of redemption. Once the wind has carried the ashes, every natural image is implicated in historical memory. This need not abolish

beauty; it must transform the ethics of seeing. To behold the red leaf responsibly is not to imagine that the victim's blood was necessary to disclose a truth. It is to refuse a world in which beauty or progress excuses the violence beneath it. To the extent that the image can still speak religiously, it speaks as a summons to protect fragile lives before they become elegies [7–9].

My theological conclusion is thus deliberately unresolved. Ben-Oni is the name by which suffering testifies against easy explanations. Binyamin is the name by which the living refuse to abandon the future. Neither is complete without the other; neither may absorb the other. A faith that speaks only Ben-Oni risks rendering responsibility to the future impossible. A faith that speaks only Binyamin becomes a machinery of consolation that can sanctify cruelty. Rachel's death, Jeremiah's weeping mother, the broken vessels, the victims of Europe, and the suffering patient all insist upon the same discipline: we may work for repair, but we must never explain away the broken. Theologically, perhaps the greatest act of fidelity is to carry both names and to let neither one silence the other.

## ADDENDUM I

## THE NAMING OF BENJAMIN IN MEDIEVAL AND MODERN INTERPRETATION: A SCHOLARLY REVIEW

### The Problem the Tradition Inherits

Genesis 35:18 [S10] is the only scene in the Torah in which a father explicitly overrides a name a mother has given. In the cycle of Genesis 29–30 the mothers name eleven of Jacob's twelve sons, each with an etymological speech that records the mother's experience: Leah's unrequited love, Rachel's rivalry with her sister, and, in Joseph's case, a prayer for another son [S6]. The twelfth naming breaks the pattern twice. Rachel names from the threshold of death, and Jacob replaces the name she gives. The text gives no reason for the replacement and records no reply from Rachel, who is already gone. The interpretive tradition has had to decide what Jacob's act means, and that decision turns on three questions: what on means, what yamin means, and whether the second name cancels the first, translates it, or answers it.

Both philological poles are biblical. The noun on (or aven) can mean trouble, sorrow or mourning, as in "I have not eaten thereof in my mourning" (be-oni, Deut 26:14) [S16] and "the bread of mourners" (lechem onim, Hos 9:4) [S20]. It can also mean vigor and generative strength, as in "the first fruits of my strength" (reshit oni, Gen 49:3) [S14] and "to him that hath no might" (le-ein onim, Isa 40:29) [S20]. Yamin means the right hand and, by extension, strength, favor and the place of honor (Ps 80:18) [S23]. Because the ancient orientation faced east, it also means the south (Ps 89:13) [3, S23]. Every major reading of the passage chooses among these senses.

### Ancient Versions and Early Interpreters

The earliest translations already lean toward sorrow. The Septuagint renders Ben-Oni as *Huios odynēs mou*, "son of my pain" [11], and Targum Onkelos gives *bar dvai*, "son of my affliction" [S34]. Both treat Jacob's Binyamin as a proper name, untranslated, so the contrast between a meaningful maternal name and an opaque paternal one is built into the

versions. Philo of Alexandria already treats the pair allegorically in *On the Change of Names*, glossing Benjamin as "son of days" [12]. Jerome's *Hebrew Questions on Genesis* records the pair as "son of my pain" and "son of the right hand" [13]. Christian reception made the scene typological: Matthew 2:18 applies Jeremiah's Rachel to the massacre at Bethlehem, which fixed Rachel-as-weeping-mother in Western religious imagination well before the Jewish commentators wrote.

**The Classical Midrash: Displacing the Question**

Rabbinic midrash is notably reticent about the names themselves. Its energy goes instead to two questions the essay also asks: why Rachel died, and why she was left by the road [14].

On the first, the midrash offers competing causes. In Bereshit Rabbah 74:4, R. Yose holds that Rachel died because of Jacob's oath, "With whomsoever thou findest thy gods, he shall not live" (Gen 31:32), which the midrash calls "an error that proceeds from the ruler" (Eccl 10:5) [S36]. An unintended word from one with authority takes effect regardless of intention. Rashi distills this into a single line: "from that curse Rachel died on the road" [S40]. R. Yehudah attributes her death to her having spoken before her sister. The Tanchuma (Vayishlach 8) places the cause in Jacob's delay in fulfilling his Bethel vow [S37]. Each of these explanations is a theodicy, and each places the cause in someone's fault, usually Jacob's. Read against the essay, the midrash shows the tradition doing exactly what the essay warns against, searching for a reason. But it also shows that tradition declining to assign the fault to Rachel's suffering itself. Where there is a culprit in these texts, it is the patriarch's speech, which bears directly on the ethics of naming. The father's word kills, and the father's word renames.

On the second question, Bereshit Rabbah 82:10 and Pesikta Rabbati 3, as condensed by Rashi on Genesis 48:7, turn the roadside grave from a deprivation into a vocation [S38, S39]. Jacob "foresaw that the exiles would pass that way" and buried her where she could plead for them. Rashi gives Jacob an extraordinary admission to Joseph: "I know that you hold it against me." The midrash thus concedes the grievance before it consoles it. Eichah Rabbah, Petichta 24 completes the arc. When the fathers and Moses plead their merits after the destruction and are not answered, Rachel argues from her own refusal of jealousy toward Leah and is answered, "For your sake, Rachel" [S35]. The structural point matters for the essay. The midrash does not restore Rachel's authority by reinstating the name Ben-Oni. It relocates her voice from the naming scene to the weeping scene, and it gives her the last word there. In the rabbinic imagination, Ben-Oni survives as an argument with God.

**The Medieval Commentators: Cancellation, Translation, or Preservation**

The medieval exegetes divide along a line the essay would recognize. Some treat Jacob's name as replacing Rachel's, some as translating it, and some as preserving it in altered form [16].

*Rashi (1040–1105)* glosses Ben-Oni simply as *ben tza'ari*, "son of my pain" [S41]. For Binyamin he proposes a geographical meaning: Benjamin alone of the sons was born in Canaan, which lies to the south (yamin, Ps 89:13) of one arriving from Aram-Naharaim. Some

editions add an alternative reading, "son of days," meaning born in Jacob's old age. Either way, on Rashi's reading the paternal name has no semantic relation to the maternal one. Elchanan Samet observes that on this view the name Binyamin may have been Jacob's intention from the start, with Rachel's dying utterance as the interruption [17]. Rashi's Binyamin answers the land and not the mother.

*Rashbam (c. 1085–1158)*, as Samet notes, reads the midwife's "this also is a son for thee" as a reassurance that Rachel's prayer at Joseph's birth, "The LORD add to me another son" (Gen 30:24) [S6], had been answered. This makes the scene unbearably precise. The prayer is granted in the moment that kills her.

*Abraham ibn Ezra (1089–1167)* gives Ben-Oni as *ben evli*, "son of my mourning," choosing the sense of Deuteronomy 26:14.

*Joseph Bekhor Shor (12th century, northern France)* states the preservationist position most crisply: Jacob "did not wish to uproot his mother's name from him entirely, but amended it to Binyamin, a term of strength" (*lo ratzah la'akor mimenu shem imo legamrei, ela tikno Binyamin, leshon chozek*). The verb is *tikken*, to repair, and the essay's Lurianic vocabulary is anticipated here in a twelfth-century peshat commentator.

*David Kimchi (Radak, c. 1160–1235)* reads Binyamin as "son of my right hand," *ben yemini*, "beloved to me, for he was born in my old age," and cites Psalm 80:18, "the man of Thy right hand." Radak's Jacob does not argue with Rachel's grief. He sets beside it a father's tenderness, so the name becomes a statement of attachment and not of correction.

*Nachmanides (Ramban, 1194–c. 1270)* gives the most important medieval reading for the essay's thesis. As his fourteenth-century epitomist Jacob ben Asher (*Tur ha-Arokh*) reports, Ramban rejects Rashi's geographical explanation. He argues that Rachel meant on as mourning, but Jacob, wishing to keep the name the mother had given, as the mothers had named all the other sons, took the same word in its other sense, strength, as in "my might, and the first fruits of my strength" (Gen 49:3). Jacob therefore called him Binyamin, "son of the right hand," the hand of strength. On Ramban's reading Binyamin is Ben-Oni translated: the father keeps the mother's word and turns it toward the good. This is a precise medieval precedent for the essay's claim that the two names are "indispensable yet noninterchangeable." It also exposes the risk the essay names. Ramban's Jacob honors Rachel's word by choosing its other meaning, and that is an act of interpretation performed on the testimony of the dying. Ramban himself, notably, reports elsewhere (on Gen 35:16 and 48:7) that he revised his view of the tomb's location after coming to the Land of Israel and seeing it.

*Hizkuni (Hezekiah ben Manoah, 13th century)* records a reading in which Binyamin alludes to an oath, since one swears with the right hand. Rabbi Y. Y. Jacobson has developed this in a contemporary homily: Rachel names the child "son of my sin," taking on herself the guilt of the stolen teraphim, and Jacob answers with "son of the oath," taking the guilt back onto his own rash word [18]. Read this way, the exchange of names is a contest of self-accusation, each parent shielding the other.

*Da'at Zekenim mi-Ba'alei ha-Tosafot (13th century)* hears in Ben-Oni a prophecy of sorrow for the tribe: the outrage at Gibeah and the near-annihilation of Benjamin (Judges 19–21). The dying mother's name becomes a foreknowledge of her descendants' suffering, which anticipates by another route the move from Genesis 35 to Jeremiah 31.

### The Early Modern and Nineteenth-century Commentators

*Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin (Netziv, 1816–1893)*, in *Ha'amek Davar*, refuses to choose: the name "has two meanings, from the language of 'my pain,' as Rashi explains, and from the language of 'my strength,'" because in being born the child took his mother's strength [19]. For the Netziv the doubleness is already in Rachel's word and is not introduced by Jacob's translation. The dying mother names both her agony and the vitality that passed from her into the child. The essay's third paragraph arrives at this reading independently, and the Netziv is its strongest classical support.

*Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–1888)*, working as always from the root, hears in on both the force a person possesses and that force spent and departing, and reads Jacob as drawing out the brighter side of the same root [20]. Like Ramban, Hirsch makes Binyamin a reading of Ben-Oni and not a replacement for it.

The mystical tradition takes a different path. The Zohar identifies Rachel with the Shekhinah, the indwelling and exiled presence. The Lurianic midnight liturgy, *Tikkun Chatzot*, is divided into a *Tikkun Rachel*, which mourns the exile of the Shekhinah, and a *Tikkun Leah*, which turns toward consolation. Gershom Scholem's discussion of this rite (in *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*) shows that Kabbalah institutionalized Rachel's refusal of consolation as a nightly obligation [21]. In this mystical liturgy, Ben-Oni is prayed every night before Binyamin is permitted.

### Modern Critical Scholarship

Modern philology has kept the doubleness of on in view while adding a historical dimension to yamin. The lexica (Brown–Driver–Briggs; Koehler–Baumgartner) [3, 22] distinguish two homonymous nouns, one meaning trouble or sorrow and the other vigor or wealth, and modern commentators generally allow that Rachel's word can bear either. Nahum Sarna's JPS commentary notes this ambiguity and the double sense of Binyamin as "son of the right hand" or "son of the south" [23]. The Mari archives of the eighteenth-century BCE mention a tribal confederation called the *Binu-yamina*, "sons of the right" or "sons of the south," distinguished from the *Binu-sim'al*, "sons of the left" or north. Daniel Fleming's work on Mari has made this group well known, and biblical scholars have long noted the parallel [24]. Most caution that the Mari name proves only that "Benjamin" was a natural directional or tribal designation, not that the biblical tribe descends from the Mari group. On this view the narrative has wrapped an older geographical or tribal name in a family story, and the father's "renaming" gives the tribe it received name.

Commentators such as Gordon Wenham have explained Jacob's act as the averting of an ill-omened name. A childbearing "son of my sorrow" would carry the catastrophe of his birth for life [25]. The obvious parallel is I Samuel 4:19–22, where the dying wife of Phinehas is told by the women attending her, "Fear not, for thou hast brought forth a son," nearly the midwife's words in Genesis 35:17. She does not answer and names the child Ichabod, "the glory is departed" [S18]. No one renames Ichabod. The pairing sharpens the essay's point. Scripture records both a dying mother's name that stood and one that was overridden, and in neither case does it say whether the mother was wrong.

Feminist and literary readers have focused on the naming speeches as the mothers' voice within a patriarchal narrative. Ilana Pardes, in *Countertraditions in the Bible* (1992),

reads the naming speeches of Genesis 29–30 as a female subplot in which Rachel and Leah narrate their rivalry and desire [26]. On such readings, Jacob's override of Rachel's last name is the point at which the patriarchal narrator reasserts control, though the text still preserves the overridden name. *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea Weiss, 2008) similarly emphasizes that the maternal name is kept in the text even as the paternal one prevails [27]. Among contemporary Jewish interpreters, Elchanan Samet (Yeshivat Har Etzion) makes the Torah's silence the key to the passage. Five verses record Rachel's death, with no word of Jacob's grief, in contrast with Abraham's mourning for Sarah and Jacob's own later mourning for Joseph. Samet proposes that Jacob's two acts correspond to the two blessings halakha prescribes when death and new life arrive together: *dayan ha-emet* for the loss and *shehecheyanu* for the gift. Ben-Oni corresponds to the first and Binyamin to the second. This is perhaps the most precise halakhic analogue to the essay's thesis, because the law requires both blessings and does not let either absorb the other. Samet also notes the two pillars Jacob sets up within a few verses, one at Bethel for the promise (35:14) and one on Rachel's grave for the loss (35:20). Yaakov Medan surveys the long dispute over the tomb's location (Gen 35:19 and 48:7 against I Sam 10:2, with Tosefta Sotah 11:13 and Sifre Devarim 352 on either side). He ties Rachel's merit in Jeremiah 31 to her restraint toward Leah, precisely the merit she pleads in Eichah Rabbah [28]. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, reading Genesis 37:35 alongside Jeremiah 31, argues that "to refuse to be comforted is to refuse to give up hope." On his reading the refusal of consolation becomes the ground of the promised return [29, S11, S21].

**Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg**

Avivah Zornberg's *Genesis: The Beginning of Desire* (1995) [30] and *The Murmuring Deep: Reflections on the Biblical Unconscious* (2009) [31] bring to these chapters a method uniquely suited to the essay's concerns. She reads midrash and the classical commentators alongside psychoanalytic and literary thought (Winnicott, Lacan, Kierkegaard, and modern fiction). She treats the gaps and silences of the text as the place where its unconscious speaks. Three strands of her work bear directly on Ben-Oni and Binyamin.

*Rachel's desire*. Zornberg gives sustained attention to Rachel's cry, "Give me children, or else I die" (Gen 30:1), and to Jacob's angry reply, "Am I in God's stead?" She reads the episode against the midrashic rebuke of Jacob, "Is this how one answers the distressed?" (Bereshit Rabbah 71:7) [S42], a criticism Ramban sharpens in his comment on 30:2. In her reading, Rachel's desire for a child is entangled from the first with the vocabulary of death, *metah anokhi*, "I am dead." Her naming of Joseph, "The LORD add to me another son," is a desire that does not rest in what it has received. Placed beside Genesis 35, this reading makes Ben-Oni the last utterance of a desire that was death-haunted from the start. The prayer for "another son" is answered in the birth that kills her. Her final name holds the fulfillment and the cost in a single word.

*The refusal of consolation and the decree of forgetting*. In her treatment of Jacob's mourning for Joseph, Zornberg dwells on Rashi's gloss to Genesis 37:35. One cannot accept consolation for the living, because "it is decreed of the dead that they be forgotten from the heart" [S41]. For Zornberg, consolation depends on a kind of forgetting that the mourner must, at some level, consent to, and Jacob's refusal signals an unconscious knowledge that the story is not finished. Her chapter "The Pit and the Rope: Recovering Joseph" in *The*

*Murmuring Deep* (pp. 297–312) [31] develops the silences that surround the Joseph story in this key. The relevance to the essay is that Jacob, who renamed Rachel's sorrow, becomes in Genesis 37 the one who "refuses to be comforted" (*va-yema'en le-hitnachem*). That is the same verb Jeremiah gives to Rachel (*me'anah le-hinachem*). The father who would not let his son bear the name of grief is himself unable to stop bearing it.

*Jacob's fear for Benjamin.* The essay could develop a further thread that Zornberg's method invites, though the observation is offered here as the editor's and not as hers. When Jacob refuses to send Benjamin to Egypt, he speaks of him as the one "left alone" of his mother. He fears that "harm befall him by the way" (*ba-derekh*), the same word that marks Rachel's death and burial "on the way" to Ephrath. He also fears that his sons would "bring down my gray hairs with sorrow (*yagon*) to the grave" (Gen 42:38; cf. 44:29–31) [S12]. The son named for the right hand is guarded by a father who can only imagine his loss in the language of the mother's death. Binyamin, in other words, never fully displaces Ben-Oni even in Jacob's own speech. In Zornberg's terms, the repressed name returns.

Zornberg's overall stance is close to the essays. She resists closure, treats the unconsoled voice as a form of knowledge rather than a failure of faith, and reads the tradition's consolations as hard-won responses to grief that they never fully cancel. Where the essay speaks of "testimony and futurity," Zornberg would speak of the tension between the desire that keeps a story open and the forgetting that allows life to go on. Both refuse to let the second term absorb the first.

**Summary: What the Tradition Offers the Essay**

The commentators set out, in effect, the full range of positions the essay considers. Rashi's geographical Binyamin is the name that does not answer Rachel at all, and so it is the model the essay fears, a future that proceeds without reference to the wound. Radak's "son of my right hand" sets a father's love beside the mother's grief without disputing it. Ramban and Bekhor Shor make Binyamin a repair (*tikkun*) of Ben-Oni: the father keeps the mother's word and turns it toward strength. This is the closest classical analogue to the essay's "two indispensables yet noninterchangeable theological languages," though it carries the risk the essay identifies, that the survivor may edit the victim. The Netziv locates both meanings in Rachel's own mouth, which grants her full authority over the doubleness. The midrash moves Rachel's voice from the naming to the weeping and lets her win the argument with God there. Kabbalah makes her refusal of consolation a nightly liturgy. Among the moderns, Samet's two blessings and Zornberg's decree of forgetting give the essay's conclusion a halakhic and a psychological counterpart. Both voices must be spoken, and the second may not be spoken in a way that silences the first.

## ADDENDUM II

## PRIMARY SOURCES IN HEBREW AND ENGLISH: BIBLE, TALMUD, MIDRASH, TARGUM AND RASHI

This addendum gives the Hebrew text and an English rendering of every biblical, talmudic and midrashic source that the poem "In the Dying of Mama Rachel" and the essay "Ben-Oni and Binyamin" cite or allude to, together with a small number of closely related passages that bear directly on the essay's argument (these are marked as supplementary). Each entry

opens with a note on where the source surfaces in the poem or essay. Entries are numbered S1–S42 and are cited by that number throughout the addenda; full bibliographic details for each appear under Source References at the end of the document.

**A. Torah**

***S1. Genesis 29:10–11 — Jacob at the well***

*Poem: "the green of her that Jacob saw at the well / and wept and rolled the stone away for."*

ויהי כאשר ראה יעקב את רחל בת לבן אחי אמו ואת צאן לבן אחי אמו ויגש יעקב ויגל את האבן מעל פי הבאר וישק את צאן לבן אחי אמו. וישק יעקב לרחל וישא את קלו ויבך.

And it came to pass, when Jacob saw Rachel the daughter of Laban his mother's brother, and the sheep of Laban his mother's brother, that Jacob went near, and rolled the stone from the well's mouth, and watered the flock of Laban his mother's brother. And Jacob kissed Rachel, and lifted his voice, and wept.

***S2. Genesis 29:17 — Rachel's beauty***

*Poem: "yefat to'ar, yefat mar'eh."*

ועיני לאה רכות ורחל היתה יפת תאר ויפת מראה.

And Leah's eyes were weak; but Rachel was of beautiful form and fair to look upon.

***S3. Genesis 29:20 — Seven years as a few days***

*Poem: "Seven years that seemed to him a few days."*

ויעבד יעקב ברחל שבע שנים ויהיו בעיניו כימים אחדים באהבתו אתה.

And Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had to her.

***S4. Genesis 29:23, 25 — The substitution of Leah***

*Poem: "so Leah would not be shamed beneath the veil." See also the Talmud [S30] and Eichah Rabbah [S35].*

ויהי בערב ויקח את לאה בתו ויבא אתה אליו ויבא אליה... ויהי בבקר והנה היא לאה ויאמר אל לבן מה זאת עשית לי הלא ברחל עבדתי עמך ולמה רמיתני.

And it came to pass in the evening, that he took Leah his daughter, and brought her to him; and he went in unto her. … And it came to pass in the morning that, behold, it was Leah; and he said to Laban: 'What is this thou hast done unto me? did not I serve with thee for Rachel? wherefore then hast thou beguiled me?'

***S5. Genesis 30:1 — "Give me children, or else I die"***

*Essay: "Rachel, who has endured infertility and rivalry…" See also Nedarim 64b [S31] and Bereshit Rabbah 71:7 [S42].*

ותרא רחל כי לא ילדה ליעקב ותקנא רחל באחתה ותאמר אל יעקב הבה לי בנים ואם אין מתה אנכי.

And when Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and she said unto Jacob: ‘Give me children, or else I die.’

### *S6. Genesis 30:22–24 — The naming of Joseph: “another son”*

*Essay: “finally receives the second son whose birth kills her”; poem: “this one too is a son.”*

ויזכר אלהים את רחל וישמע אליה אלהים ויפתח את רחמה. ותהר ותלד בן ותאמר אסף אלהים את חרפתי. ותקרא את שמו יוסף לאמר יסף ה’ לי בן אחר.

And God remembered Rachel, and God hearkened to her, and opened her womb. And she conceived, and bore a son, and said: ‘God hath taken away my reproach.’ And she called his name Joseph, saying: ‘The LORD add to me another son.’

### *S7. Genesis 31:19, 32, 34 — The teraphim, Jacob’s oath, the camel’s saddle*

*Poem: “the curse he swore over the stolen teraphim, / not knowing whose saddle hid them”; “I hid such things under a saddle once.” See Bereshit Rabbah 74:4 and Rashi [S36, S40].*

ולבן הלך לגזז את צאנו ותגנב רחל את התרפים אשר לאביה... עם אשר תמצא את אלהיך לא יחיה נגד אחינו הכר לך מה עמדי וקח לך ולא ידע יעקב כי רחל גנבתם... ורחל לקחה את התרפים ותשמם בכר הגמל ותשב עליהם וימשש לבן את כל האהל ולא מצא.

Now Laban was gone to shear his sheep. And Rachel stole the teraphim that were her father’s. … With whomsoever thou findest thy gods, he shall not live; before our brethren discern thou, what is thine with me, and take it to thee.—For Jacob knew not that Rachel had stolen them. … Now Rachel had taken the teraphim, and put them in the saddle of the camel, and sat upon them. And Laban felt about all the tent but found them not.

### *S8. Genesis 31:40–41 — Twenty years of drought and frost*

*Poem: “Jacob with his twenty winters of frost among the sheep.”*

הייתי ביום אכלני חרב וקרח בלילה ותדד שנתי מעיני. זה לי עשרים שנה בביתך עבדתיך ארבע עשרה שנה בשתי בנתיך ושש שנים בצאנך ותחלף את משכרתי עשרת מנים.

Thus, I was in the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night; and my sleep fled from mine eyes. These twenty years have I been in thy house: I served thee fourteen years for thy two daughters, and six years for thy flock; and thou hast changed my wages ten times.

### *S9. Genesis 22:9–10 — The binding of Isaac*

*Poem: “Abraham with his knife laid down, / Isaac with his offered throat.”*

ויבאו אל המקום אשר אמר לו האלהים ויבן שם אברהם את המזבח ויערך את העצים ויעקד את יצחק בנו וישם אתו על המזבח ממעל לעצים. וישלח אברהם את ידו ויקח את המאכלת לשחט את בנו.

And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built the altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar, upon the wood. And Abraham stretched forth his hand and took the knife to slay his son.

### *S10. Genesis 35:16–20 — Rachel's death and the two names*

*Essay, reference [1]; the poem's central scene.*

ויסעו מבית אל ויהי עוד כברת הארץ לבוא אפרתה ותלד רחל ותקש בלדתה. ויהי בהקשתה בלדתה ותאמר לה המילדת אל תיראי כי גם זה לך בן. ויהי בצאת נפשה כי מתה ותקרא שמו בן אוני ואביו קרא לו בנימין. ותמת רחל ותקבר בדרך אפרתה הוא בית לחם. ויצב יעקב מצבה על קברתה הוא מצבת קברת רחל עד היום.

And they journeyed from Beth-el; and there was still some way to come to Ephrath; and Rachel travailed, and she had hard labour. And it came to pass, when she was in hard labour, that the midwife said unto her: 'Fear not; for this also is a son for thee.' And it came to pass, as her soul was in departing—for she died—that she called his name Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin. And Rachel died and was buried in the way to Ephrath—the same is Beth-lehem. And Jacob set up a pillar upon her grave; the same is the pillar of Rachel's grave unto this day.

### *S11. Genesis 37:35 — Jacob refuses to be comforted (related)*

*Cited in Addendum II in connection with Zornberg and Sacks; the father who renamed sorrow later "refuses to be comforted" in the same language Jeremiah gives to Rachel. See Rashi [S41].*

ויקמו כל בניו וכל בנתיו לנחמו וימאן להתנחם ויאמר כי ארד אל בני אבל שאלה ויבך אתו אביו.

And all his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted; and he said: 'Nay, but I will go down to the grave to my son mourning.' And his father wept for him.

### *S12. Genesis 42:38; 44:20 — Benjamin as the remnant of Rachel (related)*

*Cited in Addendum II: Jacob's fear for Benjamin returns to the vocabulary of Rachel's death: harm "by the way" (ba-derekh), "sorrow" (yagon), and the son "left alone of his mother."*

ויאמר לא ירד בני עמכם כי אחיו מת והוא לבדו נשאר וקראהו אסון בדרך אשר תלכו בה והורדתם את שיבתי ביגון שאולה... ונאמר אל אדני יש לנו אב זקן וילד זקנים קטן ואחיו מת ויותר הוא לבדו לאמו ואביו אהבו.

And he said: 'My son shall not go down with you; for his brother is dead, and he only is left; if harm befall him by the way in which ye go, then will ye bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to the grave.' … And we said unto my lord: We have a father, an old man, and a child of his old age, a little one; and his brother is dead, and he alone is left of his mother, and his father loveth him.

### *S13. Genesis 48:7 — Jacob recalls the burial by the road*

*Poem: "He leaves her by the road, / a grave without a city." See Bereshit Rabbah 82:10 and Rashi [S38–S39].*

ואני בבאי מפדן מתה עלי רחל בארץ כנען בדרך בעוד כברת ארץ לבא אפרתה ואקברה שם בדרך אפרת הוא בית לחם.

And as for me, when I came from Paddan, Rachel died unto me in the land of Canaan in the way, when there was still some way to come unto Ephrath; and I buried her there in the way to Ephrath—the same is Beth-lehem.

### *S14. Genesis 49:3 — "The first fruits of my strength" (on)*

*Essay, reference [1]: the second sense of on, "vigor" or "strength." This is the verse on which Ramban builds his reading of Binyamin (Addendum II).*

ראובן בכרי אתה כחי וראשית אוני יתר שאת ויתר עז.

Reuben, thou art my first-born, my might, and the first fruits of my strength; the excellency of dignity, and the excellency of power.

### *S15. Genesis 49:31 — The Cave of Machpelah, without Rachel*

Poem: "He does not carry her to Machpelah / to lie among the fathers."

שמה קברו את אברהם ואת שרה אשתו שמה קברו את יצחק ואת רבקה אשתו ושמה קברתי את לאה.

There they buried Abraham and Sarah his wife; there they buried Isaac and Rebekah his wife; and there I buried Leah.

### *S16. Deuteronomy 26:14 — on as "mourning"*

Essay ¶3 (philology of Ben-Oni). The verse usually adduced for the sense "mourning"; compare Ibn Ezra's gloss ben evli, "son of my mourning."

לא אכלתי באני ממנו ולא בערתי ממנו בטמא ולא נתתי ממנו למת.

I have not eaten thereof in my mourning, neither have I put away aught thereof, being unclean, nor given thereof for the dead.

### *S17. Deuteronomy 29:4 (Eng. 29:5) — Moses' forty years*

Poem: "and Moses with his forty years of sand." Moses speaks in the first person.

ואולך אתכם ארבעים שנה במדבר לא בלו שלמתיכם מעליכם ונעלך לא בלתה מעל רגלך.

And I have led you forty years in the wilderness; your clothes are not waxen old upon you, and thy shoe is not waxen old upon thy foot.

## B. Prophets

### *S18. I Samuel 4:20–21 — The wife of Phinehas names Ichabod (parallel)*

*The closest biblical parallel to Genesis 35:17–18: a mother dying in childbirth, attendants saying, "Fear not, for you have borne a son," and a name drawn from catastrophe. Discussed in Addendum II.*

וכעת מותה ותדברנה הנצבות עליה אל תיראי כי בן ילדת ולא ענתה ולא שתה לבה. ותקרא לנער אי כבוד לאמר גלה כבוד מישראל אל הלקח ארון האלהים ואל חמיה ואישה.

And about the time of her death the women that stood by her said unto her: 'Fear not; for thou hast brought forth a son.' But she answered not, neither did she regard it. And she named the child Ichabod, saying: 'The glory is departed from Israel'; because the ark of God was taken, and because of her father-in-law and her husband.

### *S19. I Samuel 10:2 — Rachel's tomb "in the border of Benjamin"*

*Poem: "on the road between Jerusalem and Hebron." This verse is the basis of the ancient debate over whether the tomb lies north of Jerusalem (in Benjamin) or at Bethlehem (Gen 35:19; 48:7). See Addendum II.*

בלכתך היום מעמדי ומצאת שני אנשים עם קברת רחל בגבול בנימן בצלצח.

When thou art departed from me to-day, then thou shalt find two men by Rachel's sepulchre, in the border of Benjamin at Zelzah.

### *S20. Isaiah 40:29; Hosea 9:4 — The two senses of on*

*Essay §3, reference [3]. Isaiah uses on for strength; Hosea's lechem onim is "the bread of mourners."*

נתן ליעף כח ולאין אונים עצמה ירבה. (ישעיה מ, כט)

He giveth power to the faint; and to him that hath no might He increaseth strength. (Isaiah 40:29)

זבחיהם כלחם אונים להם כל אכליו יטמאו. (הושע ט, ד)

Their sacrifices shall be unto them as the bread of mourners; all that eat thereof shall be polluted. (Hosea 9:4)

### *S21. Jeremiah 31:14–16 (Eng. 31:15–17) — Rachel weeping for her children*

*Essay, reference [5]; poem: "Kol be-Ramah nishma," "Me'anah le-hinachem," and the divine reply.*

כה אמר ה' קול ברמה נשמע נהי בכי תמרורים רחל מבכה על בניה מאנה להנחם על בניה כי איננו. כה אמר ה' מנעי קולך מבכי ועיניך מדמעה כי יש שכר לפעלתך נאם ה' ושבו מארץ אויב. ויש תקוה לאחריתך נאם ה' ושבו בנים לגבולם.

Thus, saith the LORD: A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children; she refuseth to be comforted for her children, because they are not. Thus, saith the LORD: Refrain thy voice from weeping, and thine eyes from tears; for thy work shall be rewarded, saith the LORD; and they shall come back from the land of the enemy. And there is hope for thy future, saith the LORD; and thy children shall return to their own border.

### *S22. Jeremiah 40:1 — Ramah, chains, Babylon*

*Poem: "a thousand years on, her children would come this way / in chains toward Babylon." Ramah was the assembly point for the deportation; Jeremiah himself was there in chains.*

הדבר אשר היה אל ירמיהו מאת ה' אחר שלח אתו נבוזראדן רב טבחים מן הרמה בקחתו אתו והוא אסור באזקים בתוך כל גלות ירושלם ויהודה המגלים בבלה.

The word which came to Jeremiah from the LORD, after that Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard had let him go from Ramah, when he had taken him being bound in chains among all the captives of Jerusalem and Judah, that were carried away captive unto Babylon.

**C. Writings**

***S23. Psalm 80:18; Psalm 89:13 — The two senses of yamin***

*Essay ¶3: Binyamin as "son of the right hand" (favor, power; Radak cites Ps 80) or "son of the south" (Rashi cites Ps 89).*

תהי ידך על איש ימינך על בן אדם אמצת לך. (תהלים פ, יח)

Let Thy hand be upon the man of Thy right hand, upon the son of man whom Thou madest strong for Thyself. (Psalm 80:18)

צפון וימין אתה בראתם תבור וחרמון בשמך ירננו. (תהלים פט, יג)

The north and the south, thou hast created them; Tabor and Hermon rejoice in Thy name. (Psalm 89:13)

***S24. Job 4:7 — The friends' theodicy***

*Essay ¶5: "Job's friends commit this latter offense with remarkable theological sophistication." See Bava Metzia 58b [S33].*

זכר נא מי הוא נקי אבד ואיפה ישרים נכחדו.

Remember, I pray thee, whoever perished, being innocent? Or where were the upright cut off?

***S25. Job 38:1–4 — The voice from the whirlwind***

*Essay, reference [4]: "the divine speeches unsettle the demand that all suffering be fitted into a transparent moral economy."*

ויען ה' את איוב מן הסערה ויאמר. מי זה מחשיך עצה במלין בלי דעת. אזר נא כגבר חלציך ואשאלך והודיעני. איפה היית ביסדי ארץ הגד אם ידעת בינה.

Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said: Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee, and declare thou unto Me. Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? Declare, if thou hast the understanding.

***S26. Job 42:7 — The friends rebuked***

*Essay, reference [4]. God vindicates the sufferer's protest over the comforters' explanation.*

ויהי אחר דבר ה' את הדברים האלה אל איוב ויאמר ה' אל אליפז התימני חרה אפי בך ובשני רעיך כי לא דברתם אלי נכונה כעבדי איוב.

And it was so, that after the LORD had spoken these words unto Job, the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite: 'My wrath is kindled against thee, and against thy two friends; for ye have not spoken of Me the thing that is right, as My servant Job hath.'

**D. Mishnah and Babylonian Talmud**

***S27. Mishnah Sanhedrin 6:5 (Bavli Sanhedrin 46a) — The Shekhinah's pain***

*Essay ¶8: "the suffering presence of the Shekhinah becomes a mystical idiom for divine nearness amid collective fracture." The earliest rabbinic statement of divine co-suffering.*

אמר רבי מאיר: בשעה שאדם מצטער, שכינה מה הלשון אומרת? קלני מראשי, קלני מזרועי. אם כן המקום מצטער על דמם של רשעים שנשפך, קל וחומר על דמם של צדיקים.

Rabbi Meir said: When a person suffers, what does the Shekhinah say? 'My head is heavy; my arm is heavy.' If the Omnipresent is so pained over the blood of the wicked that is shed, how much more over the blood of the righteous.

### *S28. Megillah 29a — The Shekhinah goes into exile*

*Essay ¶8: Rachel's mourning "becomes a way of thinking about Israel in exile."*

תניא, רבי שמעון בן יוחאי אומר: בוא וראה כמה חביבין ישראל לפני הקב"ה, שבכל מקום שגלו שכינה עמהן. גלו למצרים שכינה עמהן... גלו לבבל שכינה עמהן.

It was taught Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai says: Come and see how beloved Israel is before the Holy One, blessed be He, for wherever they were exiled the Shekhinah went with them. They were exiled to Egypt, and the Shekhinah was with them … they were exiled to Babylonia, and the Shekhinah was with them.

### *S29. Hagigah 5b — God weeps in a hidden place*

*Essay ¶9: "Divine hiddenness may provide a grammar for mourning." The poem's "Heaven said nothing" sits against this tradition of a God who weeps out of sight.*

"ואם לא תשמעוה במסתרים תבכה נפשי מפני גוה" — אמר רב שמואל בר איניא משמיה דרב: מקום יש לו להקב"ה ומסתרים שמו.

"But if ye will not hear it, my soul shall weep in secret for your pride" (Jer 13:17). Rav Shmuel bar Inya said in the name of Rav: The Holy One, blessed be He, has a place, and its name is 'Secret Places.'

### *S30. Megillah 13b (parallel Bava Batra 123a) — Rachel gives Leah the signs*

*Poem: "She gave away the signs. She gave away the night." R. Elazar introduces the passage as Rachel's reward for modesty: King Saul descended from her.*

אמר לה: מינסבא לי? אמרה ליה: אין, מיהו אבא רמאה הוא ולא יכלת ליה. אמר לה: אחיו אנא ברמאות. אמרה ליה: ומי שרי לצדיקי לסגויי ברמיותא? אמר לה: אין, "עם נבר תתבר ועם עקש תתפל". אמר לה: ומאי רמיותא? אמרה ליה: אית לי אחתא דקשישא מינאי ולא מנסיב לי מקמה. מסר לה סימנין. כי מטא ליליא, אמרה: השתא מיכספא אחתאי, מסרתינהו ניהלה. והיינו דכתיב "ויהי בבקר והנה היא לאה" — מכלל דעד השתא לאו לאה היא? אלא מתוך סימנין שמסר יעקב לרחל ומסרתה ללאה, לא הוה ידע לה עד השתא.

He said to her: 'Will you marry me?' She said: 'Yes, but my father is a deceiver, and you will not prevail against him.' He said: 'I am his brother in deception.' She said: 'Is it permitted for the righteous to deal in deception?' He said: 'Yes: "With the pure thou dost show thyself pure, and with the crooked thou dost show thyself subtle" (II Sam 22:27).' He said: 'And what is his deception?' She said: 'I have a sister older than I, and he will not marry me off before her.' He gave her signs. When night came, she said: 'Now my sister will be shamed,' and she gave the signs to her. This is why it is written, "And it came to pass in the morning that, behold, it was Leah": does this imply that until then she was not Leah? Rather, because of the signs that Jacob gave Rachel and Rachel gave Leah, he did not know until then.

### *S31. Nedarim 64b — The childless as dead*

*Essay ¶6, on Rachel's infertility. The Talmud reads Gen 30:1 as a legal category.*

דתניא: ארבעה חשובין כמת: עני, ומצורע, וסומא, ומי שאין לו בנים... ומי שאין לו בנים, דכתיב: "הבה לי בנים ואם אין מתה אנכי".

As it was taught: Four are considered as dead: the poor, the leper, the blind, and one who has no children. … One who has no children, as it is written: "Give me children, or else I die."

### *S32. Berakhot 5b — "Neither they nor their reward" (supplementary)*

Bears on essay ¶¶5–6 and ¶16: the rabbinic sufferer is permitted to refuse the doctrine of redemptive affliction, and the right response is a hand, not an explanation.

רבי חייא בר אבא חלש, על לגביה רבי יוחנן. אמר ליה: חביבין עליך יסורין? אמר ליה: לא הן ולא שכרן. אמר ליה: הב לי ידך. יהב ליה ידיה ואוקמיה.

Rabbi Chiyya bar Abba fell ill, and Rabbi Yochanan went in to visit him. He said to him: 'Are your sufferings dear to you?' He said: 'Neither they nor their reward.' He said: 'Give me your hand.' He gave him his hand, and he raised him up.

### *S33. Bava Metzia 58b — Not to speak to the sufferer as Job's friends did (supplementary)*

Bears on essay ¶5 and the physician's section: halakha classifies the comforter's theodicy as ona'at devarim, wounding speech.

אם היו יסורין באין עליו, אם היו חלאים באין עליו, או שהיה מקבר את בניו, אל יאמר לו כדרך שאמרו לו חביריו לאיוב: "הלא יראתך כסלתך תקותך ותם דרכיך; זכר נא מי הוא נקי אבד".

If sufferings were coming upon him, if illnesses were coming upon him, or if he was burying his children, one may not say to him as Job's friends said to Job: "Is not thy fear of God thy confidence, and thy hope the integrity of thy ways? Remember, I pray thee, whoever perished, being innocent?" (Job 4:6–7).

## E. Midrash, Targum and Rashi

### *S34. Targum Onkelos, Genesis 35:18*

Essay ¶3. The Aramaic Targum resolves the ambiguity of on in one direction: dvai, "pain, affliction."

וקרת שמיה בר דוי, ואבוהי קרא ליה בנימין.

And she called his name Bar Dvai [son of my pain]; and his father called him Binyamin.

### *S35. Eichah Rabbah, Petichta 24 — Rachel's argument before God*

The source of the poem's central movement: the fathers plead and are not answered; Rachel argues and is answered. In the petichta, after the destruction of the Temple, Jeremiah summons the patriarchs and Moses. Abraham pleads the Akedah; Isaac that he stretched out

his neck on the altar; Jacob his years in Laban's house; Moses his forty years as Israel's faithful shepherd in the wilderness. None is answered. Rachel's speech follows and is given here in full.

באותה שעה קפצה רחל אמנו לפני הקב"ה ואמרה: ריבונו של עולם, גלוי לפניך שיעקב עבדך אהבני אהבה יתירה ועבד בשבילי לאבא שבע שנים, וכשהשלימו אותן שבע שנים והגיע זמן נשואי לבעלי, יעץ אבי להחליפני לבעלי בשביל אחותי, והוקשה עלי הדבר עד מאד כי נודעה לי העצה, והודעתי לבעלי ומסרתי לו סימן שיכיר ביני ובין אחותי כדי שלא יוכל אבי להחליפני. ולאחר כן נחמתי בעצמי וסבלתי את תאותי ורחמתי על אחותי שלא תצא לחרפה. ולערב חלפו אחותי לבעלי בשבילי, ומסרתי לאחותי כל הסימנין שמסרתי לבעלי כדי שיהא סבור שהיא רחל. ולא עוד אלא שנכנסתי תחת המטה שהיה שוכב עם אחותי, והיה מדבר עמה והיא שותקת ואני משיבתו על כל דבר ודבר כדי שלא יכיר לקול אחותי. וגמלתי חסד עמה ולא קנאתי בה ולא הוצאתיה לחרפה. ומה אני, שאני בשר ודם עפר ואפר, לא קנאתי לצרה שלי ולא הוצאתיה לבושה ולחרפה, ואתה מלך חי וקיים רחמן, מפני מה קנאת לעבודת כוכבים שאין בה ממש, והגלית בני ונהרגו בחרב ועשו אויבים בם כרצונם? מיד נתגלגלו רחמיו של הקדוש ברוך הוא ואמר: בשבילך רחל אני מחזיר את ישראל למקומן. הדא הוא דכתיב: "כה אמר ה' קול ברמה נשמע... רחל מבכה על בניה מאנה להנחם על בניה כי איננו", וכתיב: "כה אמר ה' מנעי קולך מבכי ועיניך מדמעה כי יש שכר לפעלתך", וכתיב: "ויש תקוה לאחריתך נאם ה' ושבו בנים לגבולם".

At that moment Rachel our mother leapt forward before the Holy One, blessed be He, and said: 'Master of the world, it is revealed before You that Jacob Your servant loved me with an exceeding love and served my father seven years for me. When those seven years were complete and the time of my marriage to my husband arrived, my father planned to exchange me for my sister. This was very hard for me, for I learned of the plan; I told my husband and gave him a sign by which he would know me from my sister, so that my father could not exchange me. Afterwards I relented within myself. I bore my desire, and I had compassion on my sister, that she not be exposed to shame. In the evening they exchanged my sister for me with my husband, and I gave my sister all the signs I had given my husband, so that he would think she was Rachel. More than that: I went beneath the bed on which he lay with my sister; he spoke to her and she was silent, and I answered him every word, so that he would not recognize my sister's voice. I did kindness with her; I was not jealous of her, and I did not expose her to shame. And if I, flesh and blood, dust and ashes, was not jealous of my rival and did not expose her to disgrace and shame, You, the living and enduring King, the Merciful, why were You jealous of idols in which there is nothing, so that You exiled my children, and they were slain by the sword, and their enemies did with them as they pleased?' At once the mercies of the Holy One, blessed be He, were stirred, and He said: 'For your sake, Rachel, I will return Israel to their place.' As it is written: "Thus saith the LORD: A voice is heard in Ramah … Rachel weeping for her children; she refuseth to be comforted for her children, because they are not"; and it is written: "Thus saith the LORD: Refrain thy voice from weeping, and thine eyes from tears; for thy work shall be rewarded"; and it is written: "And there is hope for thy future, saith the LORD; and thy children shall return to their own border."

### *S36. Bereshit Rabbah 74:4 — Jacob's oath as the cause of Rachel's death*

Poem: "Was it his own word that killed her?" R. Yose holds that Rachel died only because of "the old man's curse"; R. Yehudah offers another reason (that she spoke before her sister). The midrash reads Jacob's oath through Ecclesiastes 10:5.

"עם אשר תמצא את אלהיך לא יחיה" — והוה כשגגה שיוצא מלפני השליט.

"With whomsoever thou findest thy gods, he shall not live": and it was "like an error that proceeds from the ruler" (Eccl 10:5).

### *S37. Tanchuma, Vayishlach 8 — An alternative cause: the delayed vow*

*Context for the poem's question. Here Rachel's death is tied to Jacob's delay in fulfilling his Bethel vow (Gen 28:20–22); the affliction came because he "did not take notice."*

כיון שלא הרגיש, באת עליו צרת רחל, שנאמר: "ותמת רחל ותקבר".

Since he did not take notice, the affliction of Rachel came upon him, as it is said: "And Rachel died, and was buried."

### *S38. Bereshit Rabbah 82:10 — Why Rachel was buried on the road*

*Poem: "as if he knew / that a thousand years on, her children would come this way."*

מה ראה אבינו יעקב לקבור את רחל בדרך אפרת? אלא צפה יעקב אבינו שהגליות עתידות לעבור שם, לפיכך קברה שם, כדי שתהא מבקשת עליהם רחמים. הדא הוא דכתיב: "קול ברמה נשמע..."

What did our father Jacob see that he buried Rachel on the road to Ephrath? Jacob our father foresaw that the exiles would pass that way; therefore, he buried her there, so that she would plead for mercy on their behalf. Thus, it is written: "A voice is heard in Ramah …"

### *S39. Rashi on Genesis 48:7 (after Pesikta Rabbati 3) — "I know you hold it against me"*

Poem: "He leaves her by the road." Rashi gives Jacob a confession to Joseph: he knows his son resents the roadside grave.

ואקברה שם — ולא הולכתיה אפילו לבית לחם להכניסה לארץ, וידעתי שיש בלבך עלי. אבל דע לך שעל פי הדבור קברתיה שם, שתהא לעזרה לבניה, כשיגלה אותם נבוזראדן והיו עוברים דרך שם, יצאת רחל על קברה ובוכה ומבקשת עליהם רחמים, שנאמר "קול ברמה נשמע...", והקב"ה משיבה "יש שכר לפעלתך נאם ה' ושבו בנים לגבולם".

"And I buried her there": and I did not carry her even to Bethlehem, to bring her into a settled place, and I know that you hold this against me. But know that it was by the divine word that I buried her there, so that she would be a help to her children. When Nebuzaradan exiled them and they passed that way, Rachel came out upon her grave, weeping and pleading for mercy for them, as it is said, "A voice is heard in Ramah …," and the Holy One, blessed be He, answers her: "There is reward for thy work, saith the LORD; and thy children shall return to their own border."

### *S40. Rashi on Genesis 31:32 and 35:17*

*Poem: Jacob's curse; the midwife's "this one too is a son."*

לא יחיה — ומאותה קללה מתה רחל בדרך. (רש"י בראשית לא, לב)

"He shall not live": and from that curse Rachel died on the road. (Rashi, Gen 31:32)

כי גם זה לך בן — נוסף לך על יוסף. ורבותינו אמרו: עם כל שבט נולדה תאומה, ועם בנימין נולדה תאומה יתירה. (רש"י בראשית לה, יז)

"For this also is a son for thee": in addition to Joseph. And our Rabbis said: with every tribe a twin sister was born, and with Benjamin an additional twin sister was born. (Rashi, Gen 35:17)

### *S41. Rashi on Genesis 35:18 and 37:35*

*Essay, reference [2]. Rashi's first gloss reads on as sorrow; his reading of Binyamin is geographical. His comment on 37:35 is the "decree of forgetting" discussed in Addendum II.*

בן אוני — בן צערי. בנימין — ...לפי שהוא לבדו נולד בארץ כנען, שהיא בנגב כשאדם בא מארם נהרים... בן ימין, לשון "צפון וימין אתה בראתם". (רש"י בראשית לה, יח)

"Ben-oni": son of my pain. "Binyamin": … because he alone was born in the land of Canaan, which lies to the south (negev) as one comes from Aram-Naharaim … ben yamin, in the sense of "The north and the south (yamin), Thou hast created them" (Ps 89:13). (Rashi, Gen 35:18)

וימאן להתנחם — אין אדם מקבל תנחומין על החי וסבור שמת, שעל המת נגזרה גזירה שישתכח מן הלב, ולא על החי. (רש"י בראשית לז, לה)

"But he refused to be comforted": a person does not accept consolation for one who is alive but thought dead, for it is decreed of the dead that they be forgotten from the heart, but not of the living. (Rashi, Gen 37:35)

### *S42. Bereshit Rabbah 71:7 — "Is this how one answers the distressed?"*

*Related to Gen 30:1–2 and discussed in Addendum II. When Jacob answers Rachel's plea in anger, God rebukes him; Ramban on 30:2 makes the same criticism.*

אמר לו הקב"ה: כך עונין את המעיקות?

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: 'Is this how one answers the distressed?'

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S14. Genesis 49:3. “The first-fruits of my strength” (on). Hebrew: Masoretic Text, unpointed. English: The Holy Scriptures according to the Masoretic Text. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society; 1917.

S15. Genesis 49:31. The Cave of Machpelah, without Rachel. Hebrew: Masoretic Text, unpointed. English: The Holy Scriptures according to the Masoretic Text. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society; 1917.

S16. Deuteronomy 26:14. on as “mourning” Hebrew: Masoretic Text, unpointed. English: The Holy Scriptures according to the Masoretic Text. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society; 1917.

S17. Deuteronomy 29:4 (Eng. 29:5). Moses’ forty years. Hebrew: Masoretic Text, unpointed. English: The Holy Scriptures according to the Masoretic Text. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society; 1917. Hebrew versification 29:4; English 29:5.

S18. I Samuel 4:20–21. The wife of Phinehas names Ichabod (parallel). Hebrew: Masoretic Text, unpointed. English: The Holy Scriptures according to the Masoretic Text. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society; 1917.

S19. I Samuel 10:2. Rachel’s tomb “in the border of Benjamin” Hebrew: Masoretic Text, unpointed. English: The Holy Scriptures according to the Masoretic Text. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society; 1917.

S20. Isaiah 40:29; Hosea 9:4. The two senses of on. Hebrew: Masoretic Text, unpointed. English: The Holy Scriptures according to the Masoretic Text. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society; 1917.

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S24. Job 4:7. The friends’ theodicy. Hebrew: Masoretic Text, unpointed. English: The Holy Scriptures according to the Masoretic Text. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society; 1917.

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S27. Mishnah Sanhedrin 6:5 (Bavli Sanhedrin 46a). The Shekhinah’s pain. Mishnah, Seder Nezikin (Vilna ed., in Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 46a). Translation: editor.

S28. Megillah 29a. The Shekhinah goes into exile. Talmud Bavli. Vilna: Romm; 1880–1886. Translation: editor.

S29. Hagigah 5b. God weeps in a hidden place. Talmud Bavli. Vilna: Romm; 1880–1886. Translation: editor.

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S33. Bava Metzia 58b. Not to speak to the sufferer as Job's friends did (supplementary). Talmud Bavli. Vilna: Romm; 1880–1886. Translation: editor.

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S35. Eichah Rabbah, Petichta 24. Rachel's argument before God. Midrash Rabbah. Vilna: Romm; 1878. Translation: editor.

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S40. Rashi on Genesis 31:32 and 35:17. . Rashi (Solomon ben Isaac), in Mikraot Gedolot, Genesis. Translation: editor.

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