"Sealing the Book with Tears":
Divine Weeping on Mount Nebo and in the Warsaw Ghetto

Rabbi Nehemia Polen

Death—as the death of the other— . . . is emotion *par excellence*,
affection or being affected *par excellence*.
In every death is shown the nearness of the neighbor, and the
responsibility of the survivor.
—Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*

Moses fails to enter Canaan not because his life was too short but
because it is a human life.
—Franz Kafka, *Diaries*

In sublime, heavy cadences, the Torah describes the end of the life of Moses.

And Moses went up from the plains of Moab unto mount Nebo, to the top of Pisga, that is over against Jericho. And the Lord showed him all the Land, even Gilead as far as Dan; and all Naphtali, and the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, and all the land of Judah as far as the hinder sea. . . . And the Lord said unto him: "This is the land which I swore unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, saying: I will give it unto thy seed; I have caused thee to see it with thine eyes, but thou shalt not go thither." So Moses the servant of the Lord died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the Lord. And He buried him in the valley of the land of Moab. . . . And no person knows of his sepulchre unto this day. And Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died; his eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated. And the children of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; and the days of weeping in the mourning for Moses were ended. . . . And there hath not arisen a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face; in all the signs and wonders, which the Lord sent him to do in the land of Egypt . . . and in all the mighty hand, and in all the awesome deeds, which Moses wrought in the sight of all Israel. (Deut. 34:1–12)[1]

Near the beginning of the Pentateuch God forms the first human out of the dust of the earth and blows the breath of life into his nostrils (Gen. 2:7). The biblical narrative starts with God fashioning Adam by His own hands, vivifying—actually inflating—him by applying the divine mouth to His creature's face. Now at the end of the Pentateuch, in Deuteronomy 34, God decommissions his most trusted servant in the privacy of Pisgah. The second half of verse 5, translated as "ACCORDING TO THE WORD OF THE LORD," reads in Hebrew *al pi Adonai*, literally "by the mouth of the Lord." The Talmud understands this to mean that Moses was taken by a Divine kiss. In other words, God's mouth once again touches the mouth of His creature—we can imagine the strength of the seal formed by that intimate contact—and God withdraws the breath He had emplaced long before. And just as God formed Adam with His own hands, so now does God return Moses to the earth in the same manner: "AND HE BURIED HIM IN THE VALLEY OF THE LAND OF MOAB" (v. 6).[2]

These last verses of the Torah are discussed in a passage of the Babylonian Talmud (*b. Baba Batra* 14b–15a; cf. *b. Menahot* 30a),[3] which asks, "Who wrote the Scriptures?" This crucial question, posed in such a disarmingly direct manner, sets off a long discussion of the books of the Bible. The passage begins with the statement that "Moses wrote his own book and the portion of Balaam and Job. Joshua wrote the book which bears his name and [the last] eight verses of the Pentateuch." This last assertion is established by reference to Deuteronomy 34:5, "So MOSES THE SERVANT OF THE LORD DIED THERE." "Now is it possible that Moses while still alive[4] would have written the words, 'Moses died there'? The truth is, however, that up to this point Moses wrote, from this point Joshua wrote." This view, attributed to Rabbi Judah (or, according to another tradition, to Rabbi Nehemia), is challenged by Rabbi Simeon: "Can [we imagine the] scroll of the Torah being short of one word, and is it not written, TAKE THIS BOOK OF THE TORAH (Deut. 31:26)? No; what we must say is that up to this point the Holy One, blessed be He, dictated and Moses repeated and wrote, and from this point God dictated and Moses wrote in tears."

A troubling dilemma: If Moses wrote the last eight verses, then he apparently wrote an untruth, for Deuteronomy 34:5 could not have been accurate at the moment he was writing. But if Moses didn't write the last verses, then the Torah scroll would have been incomplete and thus not a true Torah scroll.

The paradox is deeper still when we reflect on verse 10: "AND THERE HATH NOT ARISEN A PROPHET SINCE IN ISRAEL LIKE UNTO MOSES, WHOM THE LORD KNEW FACE TO FACE." This verse underscores the uniqueness of the Mosaic prophecy and thus the primacy of the Pentateuch in the biblical canon.[5] For Jews, of course, the Pentateuch is the foundation and generative core of the entire Bible. These verses, placed at the culmination of the Pentateuchal narrative, serve to authenticate the whole book; they are its seal, the ground of its authority.[6] The suggestion that the last eight verses were written by Joshua, while straightforward and plausible, leaves Moses' work unfinished when he

died, with the all-important lines left out. What does it do to the primacy of Mosaic prophecy if it was a subsequent disciple, a lesser prophet, who made this very assertion?

The question gains troubling power when we note the astonishing sweep of "And there hath not arisen a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses." This is a not a prospective statement that looks forward to a distant future but a *retrospective statement,* a categorical declaration spoken from a position of finality, of "last things," sealing not only the Pentateuch but the entirety of prophetic activity in Judaism by espying all of history in its rear-facing view. In the vastness of its sweep it surely rivals Genesis's "In the beginning God created . . ." Taken together, Genesis 1 and Deuteronomy 34 are bookends that frame the Pentateuch; they are the ultimate assertions of God-as-Omniscient-Narrator.[7]

That is not all. The last part of verse 10 is also notable: "whom the Lord knew face to face." Not that Moses knew God face-to-face—but that God knew Moses. In its focus on the singular quality of God's connection to His servant, it goes beyond other passages such as Numbers 12:6–8, whose main concern is the unique character of Moses. Here the stress is the intimacy of the Divine knowing—*yeda'o,* using the same verb the early chapters of Genesis employ for carnal knowledge: "and Adam knew Eve his wife" (Gen. 4:1).[8] With the intensity of this spiritual *eros,* it is no wonder that (as our Talmud passage tells us) Moses deviated from scribal convention and did not repeat the words dictated to him.

Jewish tradition largely settled on the view of Rabbi Simeon that Moses himself wrote the final verses as being more consistent with the special position of the Torah ("the Five Books of Moses") in the biblical canon. But what about the problem of Moses writing of his death in the past tense? Commentators noted a striking ambiguity in the phrase, "Moses wrote in tears": it could be understood to mean that Moses wept as he wrote; or that Moses wrote the words *with tears*—instead of ink.[9]

The image of Moses weeping as he wrote has emotional poignancy but does not seem fully consistent with Moses' character in the rest of the Pentateuch. Unlike Jacob, Moses does not weep when he meets his wife-to-be at the well (Exod. 2:15–21; cf. Gen. 29:11). When God threatens to destroy Israel in the aftermath of the Golden Calf episode and Moses insists that their sin be forgiven, his steely defiance includes a cool invitation for God to "erase me from the book which You have written" (Exod. 32:32). So it is surprising that Moses would weep in self-pity at the inscription of his death. It is also suggestive that in Deuteronomy 34 itself, we are told that "the children of Israel wept for Moses" (v. 8); by contrast, "[Moses'] eye was undimmed" (v. 7). Since one consequence of weeping is a blurring of vision, a dimming of the eye, the statement that his eye was not dim actually suggests that as the end approached, Moses did not weep. For all these reasons, it is preferable to

understand the Talmudic passage as meaning that Moses wrote the words *with tears*.

One must imagine here a kind of scribal darkroom with time as the sacred fixative, so that the tears gradually turn into ink, disclosing their message after Moses had in fact died, thereby skirting the paradox: at the time he wrote in tears the message was not yet readable.[10] The special character of the Torah as God's word and yet "the Torah of Moses" is upheld.[11]

But if Moses did not weep, whose tears are these, with which Moses wrote?

In the death scene of last eight verses, there are after all two characters, Moses and God. Could the tears be not those of the servant but of the Master?

The suggestion that the tears were God's is less startling when we recall the importance of divine pathos in rabbinic thought. As Henry Slonimsky puts it, "The Midrashic imagination is unabashed and strips God of the usual pomp and power. . . . When the enemies had destroyed the Temple, . . . [w]e have a God in tears . . . refusing to be robbed of the supreme prerogative of the heart to weep and to suffer compassion."[12] Unlike later philosophical expositions of Judaism, the Talmud and classical Midrashim are full of anthropomorphic and anthropopathic imagery. For the Midrash (again quoting Slonimsky), "if anyone can be said to be in need of comfort it is God, not Israel."[13] Thus it is entirely possible that the Talmud meant that *God* was weeping—for the loss of His most trusted servant and intimate friend.

This possibility gains likelihood when we recall that the rabbis consistently portray the relationship between God and Moses as intimately personal, including an aspect of physical contact. In this they are following Scripture itself, with such passages as Exodus 33 and 34, where Moses asks God to show him His Glory, meaning His visible form. Working out a strategy for Moses to survive the experience, God puts Moses in the cleft of the rock and protects him with His palm. And as noted above, God Himself buries Moses. Expanding on this, the Talmud *Sotah* 13b describes how Moses was carried from the portion of Reuben to the portion of Gad, cradled in the wings of the *Shekhinah*, which Rashi explains to mean "in the flap of God's Garment of Radiance."[14]

This intimate relationship is compared by the Midrash to that between husband and wife.[15] And the intimacy of God's direct contact with Moses plays a role in the rabbinic understanding of how Torah was given. We are told that Moses acquired his radiant countenance (beams of light: Exod. 34:29–35) while the Tablets were being passed from God's hands to Moses' hands.[16] The Tablets were six handbreadths wide; God's hands held two handbreadths, Moses' hands held two, with two handbreadths of stone separating hand from Hand.[17] And the residue of that brush with the Divine became the rays of light beaming out of Moses' face.

Michael Fishbane cites the early midrash *Sifre Deuteronomy* (343), which describes God's word emerging as fire from His right hand, eventually inscribing itself on the tablets of Moses. Fishbane notes that in the midrashic myth,

"God's word emerges from the divine essence as visible fire and takes instructional shape as letters and words upon the tablets."[18] While that passage refers to the tablets, we are arguing that our Talmudic passage should be understood in a similar way: tears emerge from the divine self and, with the help of Moses, are inscribed upon the parchment of the first Torah scroll.

Finally, the midrash Deuteronomy Rabbah on our passage makes God's tears explicit: "God kissed Moses and took away his soul with a kiss of the mouth, and God, if one may say so, wept."[19] The only element added by the Talmudic passage in *Baba Batra* then would be that Moses used those divine tears to inscribe the last eight verses and defeat the paradox of a self-referential account of one's death. Moses thus emerges as the exemplar of the human condition, the quintessential person whose life is sealed in the tears of others, whose achievement is only revealed in retrospect, after taking leave of the stage.

Just as Moses stands revealed by the last verses of the Torah, so does God. If the tears are His, we discover that He, too, suffers. He grieves with His creation, laments its pain, feels the anguish of its thwarted yearnings and unrealized visions.[20] For to have made a creature out of the dust, even such a one as Moses, means to have scoped a compass of finitude. As noted above, the Torah begins with God's handiwork exiled from the Garden, and it ends with His servant gazing at the Promised Land from afar. The exile, the unfinished nature of the work, cannot but reflect on the Maker as well; in weeping for Moses, God acknowledges His own entanglement in what He has wrought. God is implicated in finitude and that awareness made tears flow—God's own tears. And as God showed Moses the Land from the top of Pisgah, the Temple was still hundreds of years in the future, and its destruction hundreds of years beyond that, but it was all visible then and there. Who could not but weep?

God wept at the death of His greatest prophet and most devoted servant. As the divine mouth sought out the mouth of the son of Amram, tears flowed from one face to the other face. "The Lord knew Moses": a pouring of the self into the other, completing the other, thus completing the self. For the crown of Divine greatness is just this, that God suffers with His creatures, shedding tears: transcendence melting into finitude.

The only God known to Jews is the God who has poured Himself onto parchment, who so loved His servant that He wept over that creature's death and by weeping, disclosed His own implication in finitude.[21] Tears are the only disclosing solvent for the Absolute.[22] This, then, is the Torah's coda, the summit to which everything preceding has aimed. The capstone of the Torah is the Divine weeping, the Divine eulogy for Moses; it is God's mourning the loss of His love relationship with Moses, thereby revealing the truth and power of that love for him and by extension for Israel and the world. How, after all, could the Torah—inscribing the wisdom of the Infinite One—*end;* how could it remain other than perpetually open? It could only be brought to closure by

those eight verses, signaling the Divine passion, the Divine engagement with Moses, the Divine willingness to be affected by humanity's greatest exemplars and thus by all humanity.

The power of the Talmudic reading emerges when we note that by its light, 34:10 is *self-referential*. "And there hath not arisen a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face"—*at that very moment, the moment of death*. If the key to prophecy is relationship, never was the divine-human relationship stronger than when mouth pressed against mouth, when vital ocular fluid flowed from the Holy Ancient One onto the face of the servant, running down his beard, down his robe, like the dew of Hermon, onto the scroll: for there God ordained blessing. A death that was life for evermore. The last eight verses, and by extension the entire Torah, become a completion cycle and a love letter.

And it is just this secret of divine weeping that explains how Moses could have written those final verses. For how could even the most humble of men write "And there hath not arisen a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses" with equanimity? Only by focusing on God's emotions, not his own. Had Moses wept, his writing would have drowned in a sea of self-regard and subjectivity. It was his contemplation of God's weeping that enabled him to transcend the natural tendency to human subjectivity and to complete the work from God's perspective—that is, to write the Five Books of Moses as sacred scripture, as the cornerstone of everything that is to come in Judaism.

The tradition of ascribing profound emotions to God was largely neglected or suppressed by the medieval Jewish philosophers. Such great thinkers as Maimonides conceived of God as pure intellect; it followed that the only way to approach the divine was by cultivating one's intellect at the expense of other aspects of the human psyche. These tendencies were to some degree balanced and corrected by the flourishing of the Kabbalah, but the full return of the personal, passionate God of the Bible, Talmud, and Midrash awaited the Hasidic movement in the eighteenth century. Hasidism promoted *devekut*—"communion with God"—as a central religious value. In some Hasidic circles *devekut* was understood as loss of ego, the individual self merging with the Absolute. But alongside this tendency there was also a personalistic understanding of God, who bore close resemblance to the deity of Tanakh and classic Aggadah, and who could be approached by the individual *hasid* in prayer and other modes of devoted relationship. In the tales and folk traditions of the movement, the mode of dialogic intimacy held a far more prominent place than that of acosmism and merging with the Absolute, but it must be understood that part of the genius of Hasidism is that the two approaches were seen to complement rather than conflict with each other.

Alongside *devekut*, another keyword in Hasidism is *hitkashrut*—"bonding." What *devekut* describes for the *hasid* in relation to God, *hitkashrut* portrays for the relationship between the *hasid* and the master, known as the *rebbe* or *zad-*

dik. The ideal is for the *rebbe* and *hasid* to bond soul to soul, heart to heart, destiny to destiny. The bonding is mutual and reciprocal: the *hasid* bonds himself to the *rebbe* and the *rebbe* to *hasid;* but the *hasid* also bonds himself to that which the *rebbe* holds dear. Through attachment to the *rebbe*, even the simplest *hasid* is in touch with God, Torah, and the Hasidic community.

The story of the growth and spread of Hasidism throughout Eastern Europe has been told elsewhere; our concern here is to suggest that for all the complexity and diversity of Hasidic spirituality, the inner life of the movement might be grasped by focusing on the two themes of *devekut* and *hitkashrut*: bonding to God, to the *rebbe*, and the community of fellow *hasidim*.

With this emphasis in mind we might approach the master who penned the final work of Hasidic teachings in Poland, Rabbi Kalonymos Kalmish Shapiro (1889–1943).[23] Known as the Rebbe of Piaseczno, he was a multifaceted personality who served as leader to an intellectual elite as well as to the desperately poor common folk of interwar Poland. Famed as a pedagogue and educational theorist, he was also celebrated for his knowledge of medicine. In the Warsaw Ghetto, as Polish Jewry went through its death agony, Rabbi Shapiro continued to teach, to lead, to give material and spiritual support, and finally to show how it is possible to maintain a radiant faith in the midst of the deepest darkness and despair. His last book, which he referred to as "Torah insights from the years of wrath 5700–5702 [1939–1942]," was among the manuscripts he buried in 1943, shortly before the complete destruction of the ghetto. The manuscript was discovered after the war and was eventually published in Israel under the title *Esh Kodesh* (Fire of holiness). Composed during a time of utter personal crisis and communal devastation, after he had already lost most of his family, it is the last work of Hasidism written in Poland.[24]

The great theme of *Esh Kodesh* is weeping—divine weeping. Rabbi Shapiro revisits the aggadic passages on God's tears and through them finds a language to address his community in faithfulness and integrity. The theme of divine suffering enables him to rise above the most likely, understandable response: the silence of collapse and despair. It also allows him to avoid the platitudes of theodicy, to avoid sounding notes that (no matter how holy) would not have rung true in that time and place. Instead, he embraces the midrashic image of God weeping alone in His Inner Chambers, and avers that the *hasid* can push in, join his tears with God's, communing with God in suffering, just as at happier times we commune with God in shared joy.

As he wrote in March 1942, shortly before the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto:

> God, blessed be He, is to be found in His inner chambers weeping, so that one who pushes in and comes close to Him by means of studying Torah, weeps together with God, and studies Torah with Him. Just this makes the difference: the weeping, the pain which a person undergoes by himself, alone, may have the

> effect of breaking him, of bringing him down, so that he is incapable of doing anything. But the weeping which the person does together with God—that strengthens him. He weeps—and is strengthened; he is broken—but finds courage to study and teach. It is hard to raise one's self up, time and again, from the tribulations, but when one is determined, stretching his mind to connect to the Torah and Divine service, then he enters the Inner Chambers where the Blessed Holy One is to be found; he weeps and wails together with Him, as it were, and even finds the strength to study Torah and serve Him.[25]

What matters most for Rabbi Shapiro and for Hasidism is relationship. Relationship with the other, compassion for the other, suffering with the other is itself a kind of redemption. For what is redemption if not the finding of our most fully human self, in the act of imitatio Dei? It is not just that God suffers with us, for us, because we suffer, but that God is most God when He suffers; He comes most into Himself when He identifies with Israel, with her humanity, her vulnerability, her personal and collective destiny. Similarly, we become most like God when we transcend our own suffering, when we participate in the suffering of others and in the suffering of God. Because God is God, He suffers most intensely, infinitely; His suffering must remain hidden. But because God remains God, He also remains the hope for redemption in a concrete sense. Because humans are human, they do not decide when or how to end their suffering or to claim to know its meaning. But, because humans are human, they can arouse themselves, take hold of inner, hidden resources—in other words, grasp their faith—and thereby hope to arouse God to once again announce His redemptive presence in a world that still awaits Him.

The tears Rabbi Shapiro shed for his own family and community, for humanity, for God, fell on sheets of paper and emerged as words of Torah, words of Hasidism. They brought to a close a period that had begun two hundred years earlier, a period and movement that signaled hope to the Jews of Eastern Europe and a rebirth of religious creativity for Judaism as a whole. Hasidism was miraculously revived after the war in new forms, but the prewar world will never return. Marking the end of one era, Rabbi Shapiro's words, and tears, are now being recovered for inspiration and faith in another.

Were those tears his own, or God's?

Moses dipped his quill into the sacred tears and wrote the last verses of the Torah, sealing his life and his book in the only manner it could be sealed, with the divine ocular fluid, the viscosity of which formed the letters so that the story could be told and made available for those yet to come, yet to appear on the loom of time, to face joy and sadness and joy again, comforted now by the human examples of such as Moses himself, facing the end and thus transcending it, facing the other weeping Face, in the work of compassion that must come to closure but is always open.

Notes

My understanding of Levinas's thought and its relevance to the theme of this essay have been greatly enhanced by conversations with Dr. Jacob Meskin, to whom I express my sincere thanks. The original impetus for this essay came from Professor Kimberley Patton, who also graciously provided much guidance and encouragement along the way. I am deeply grateful for her help and her friendship, now and through the years.

1. My translation of Deuteronomy 34 is based on that of J. H. Hertz in his *Pentateuch and Haftorahs,* 2nd ed. (London: Soncino Press, 1988), 915–17, with some modifications, notably in verse 6, where Hertz has, "And he was buried in the valley of the land of Moab," using the passive voice (against the Hebrew), no doubt to avoid the anthropomorphism.

2. The ring structure linking God's compassion for Adam in Genesis with his care for Moses in Deuteronomy is noted in *b. Sotah* 14a, the Talmudic passage enjoining human imitation of God's compassionate acts: "Rabbi Simlai expounded: Torah begins with an act of benevolence and ends with an act of benevolence. It begins with an act of benevolence, for it is written, AND THE LORD GOD MADE FOR ADAM AND FOR HIS WIFE COATS OF SKIN, AND HE CLOTHED THEM (Gen. 3:21); and it ends with an act of benevolence, for it is written, AND HE BURIED HIM IN THE VALLEY (Deut. 34:6)."

3. This passage sets out the proper sequence of the biblical books when copied on a single scroll. It has been the subject of scrutiny by scholars interested in the formation of the biblical canon. See Sid Z. Leiman, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence* (Hamden, CT: Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1976); Louis Jacobs, *Structure and Form in the Babylonian Talmud* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), ch. 3.

4. Following the version in *b. Menahot* 30a, *Baba Batra* has "having died." While the point is the same with either reading, we follow the *Menahot* version because it highlights the problem with greater clarity. Our *aggadah* as found in the Babylonian Talmud is a much expanded exposition of an earlier midrashic theme. Compare the earlier *Sifre on Deuteronomy,* ed. Louis Finkelstein (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1969), 427.

5. See *b. Ta'anit* 9a: "Is there anything in the Sacred Writings to which allusion cannot be found in the Torah?" Rashi ad loc.: "Moses [alluded to all Scripture] in the Torah, for the Pentateuch is the foundation of the Prophets and the Hagiographa, and a support for every [verse] can be found in the Torah."

6. This verse recalls others that emphasize the uniqueness of Moses and his prophecy such as Numbers 12:8; cf. also Exodus 14:31, 19:9, 20:18, 33:11. But its placement at the end of the Torah clearly elevates its rhetorical moment; it is the Torah's coda, its final comment on Moses and itself.

7. On this topic I have learned much from Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), especially ch. 2. But while Sternberg cites our *Baba Batra* Talmudic passage, his approach to it is less than fully satisfying in my view, and this essay unfolds along a different path. Jeffrey H. Tigay, "The Significance of the End of Deuteronomy (Deuteronomy 34:10–12)," in *Texts, Temples and Traditions: A Tribute to Menahem Haran,* ed. by M. V. Fox, V. A. Hurowitz,

A. Hurvitz, M. L. Klein, B. J. Schwartz, and N. Shupak (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 137–43, takes a historicist approach; cf. also Isaac B. Gottlieb, "*Sof Davar:* Biblical Endings," *Prooftexts* 11 (1991): 213–24.

8. Cf. Dennis T. Olson, *Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 169: "To 'know' another person in Hebrew denotes an intimate relationship. To know 'face to face' pushes the level of intimacy even higher, straining to express near parity or equality." Olson's theological approach to Deuteronomy, while focusing on the biblical text without the Talmudic reading, is remarkably consistent with the perspective we are developing here.

9. See commentaries of *Ritva* (Rabbi Yom Tov ben Abraham Ishbili), *Maharsha* (Rabbi Samuel Edels), and *Iyyun Ya'akov* (Rabbi Jacob Reischer) to *Baba Batra* 15a (pp. 55a–56a in *Ein Ya'akov* anthology of Talmudic *aggadah,* ed. Romm [Vilna: Romm, 1912]).

10. The Gaon of Vilna proposes another approach leading to much the same result: Moses wrote the letters of the last eight verses but all jumbled together, not separated into words. Only after he died were the letters arranged by Joshua in the format we now have, disclosing their semantic content. This view of the Gaon of Vilna is quoted by Rabbi Hanokh Zundel ben Yosef, *Anaf Yosef* on *Ein Ya'akov* (Vilna: Romm, 1912), *Baba Batra* 15 (55b in the *Ein Ya'akov* pagination).

11. Cf. James W. Watts, "The Legal Characterization of Moses in the Rhetoric of the Pentateuch," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 117 (1998): 415–26. Note especially on p. 425, "Moses' scribal role . . . [makes] him the only authorized tradent of divine law."

12. Henry Slonimsky, *Essays* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press; Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1967), 6–7. For more recent writing on this theme, see Michael Fishbane, "'The Holy One Sits and Roars': Mythopoesis and Midrashic Imagination," in his *The Exegetical Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 22–40. Relevant to our theme is Fishbane's observation that "a spiritual eros animates midrashic exegesis" (19). See also David Stern, *Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 73–95. Finally, Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, in "When the Rabbi Weeps: On Reading Gender in Talmudic Aggadah," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies and Gender Issues* 4 (2001): 56–83, argues convincingly that the rabbinic self-image needed to include tears—stereotypically associated with the feminine—in its understanding of the creative emergence of Oral Torah in the Bet Midrash. Her argument is consistent with the approach taken here, with God in the role of weeper, giving birth to the Written Torah.

13. Slonimsky, *Essays,* 43.

14. For an earlier instance, see *b. Sotah* 11a, commenting on Exodus 2:4, "And his sister stood at a distance, to know what would befall him." The Talmudic *aggadah* explains "sister" not to mean Miriam but rather the Shekhinah—God's manifest Presence. God in the guise of the protective older sister stands watch over baby Moses in the bulrushes.

15. Midrash Debarim Rabbah, ed. Saul Lieberman, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem: Shalem Books, 1992), 129. The prooftext is Deuteronomy 33:1, "This is the blessing which Moses, the man of God . . ." The passage hangs on a wordplay on the Hebrew *ish,* which can mean "husband" as well as "man." Note that the midrash has Moses as the *ish*—the husband, with God as the obedient wife—a startling idea indeed.

16. Deuteronomy Rabbah 3:12.

17. Exodus Rabbah 47:11.

18. Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination,* 9. Cf. Fishbane, *The Kiss of God: Spiritual and Mystical Death in Judaism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994). See also Admiel Kosman, "Breath, Kiss, and Speech as the Source of the Animation of Life: Ancient Foundations of Rabbinic Homilies on the Giving of the Torah as the Kiss of God," in *Self, Soul and Body in Religious Experience,* ed. A. I. Baumgarten, J. Assmann, and G. G. Stroumsa (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 96–124.

19. Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:6 (end). Note also the striking passage in *Sifra,* an early halakhic midrash from the school of Rabbi Akiva, on Leviticus 1:1, which uses erotic language to describe the intromission of the Divine Glory into the space between the Cherubim, in order to utter the Word. This midrashic passage is particularly relevant to our theme in that it goes on to say that while humans may not see God in life, they may see Him "at their death."

20. The classic rabbinic text of divine participation in human suffering is the Mishnah at *b. Sanhedrin* 46a: "Rabbi Meir said, When a human suffers, what expression does the Shekhinah use?—'My head is too heavy for me; my arm is too heavy for me.'" The human referred to is a criminal executed for a capital offense. The Mishnah concludes, "And if God is so grieved for the blood of the wicked that is shed, how much more so over the blood of the righteous!" Notable on this passage is the comment of Rashi at *b. Hagigah* 15b, s.v. *Kalani me-roshi* [My head is too heavy for me]: "my arm is too heavy for me, *for I have created this individual who died on account of his sin*" (emphasis added). That is, God grieves for the failure of His creature, a failure that necessarily implicates Him as well.

21. Cf. *b. Berakhot* 5b, in which Rabbi Yohanan visits his ailing disciple Rabbi Eleazar ben Pedat. Rabbi Yohanan, famed for his beauty, uncovers his arm and its radiance lights up the room. Rabbi Eleazar wept "for this beauty which would be swallowed by the dust." On this passage, see Aharon R. E. Agus, "The Flesh, the Person, and the Other," in *Self, Soul and Body in Religious Experience,* 148–70.

22. Cf. *b. Berakhot* 32b: "Rabbi Eleazar said, From the day on which the Temple was destroyed the gates of prayer have been closed. . . . But though the gates of prayer are closed, the gates of weeping are not closed."

23. For a fuller account, see Nehemia Polen, *The Holy Fire* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1994). For an earlier hasidic master who links tears, Torah creativity, and the appearance of new sacred books, see Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, *Likkutei Moharan* (Brooklyn: Moriah, 1974), 2:30, p. 23b; cf. also 1:262, p. 118b.

24. This fact was pointed out by Mendel Piekarz in his Hebrew work *Ha-Te'udah ha-Hasidit ha-Sifrutit ha-Aharonah al Admat Polin: Divrei ha-Rabbi mi-Piaseczno be-Getto Varshe* (The last Hasidic literary document written in Poland: The teachings of the Rebbe of Piaseczno in the Warsaw Ghetto) (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1979); reprinted in Piekarz's *Hasidut Polin bein Shtei ha-Milhamot u-vi-Gezerot Tav-Shin—Tav-Shin-Heh* (Ideological trends of Hasidism in Poland during the interwar period and the Holocaust) (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1990).

25. Rabbi Kalonymos Kalmish Shapiro, *Esh Kodesh* (Jerusalem: Vaad Hasidei Piaseczno, 1960), 178–79; translation by Nehemia Polen in Polen, *The Holy Fire,* 119.

HOLY TEARS

WEEPING IN THE RELIGIOUS IMAGINATION

EDITED BY

Kimberley Christine Patton
and
John Stratton Hawley

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

PRINCETON AND OXFORD