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"You are what you read:"
An analysis of Jewish scripture-eating practices

Food practices in Judaism are prolific and sophisticated. The practices that usually come to mind are *Kashrut* (i.e. Kosher food laws) or holiday-related (e.g. food restrictions during Passover), but one of the lesser-known types is that of 'scripture-eating'—the ritual consumption of foods that have sacred phrases, words, or even letters inscribed on them in some way. While these rituals were seemingly common in Medieval Europe, they have fallen largely out of practice in modern times. That is, with the exception of one practice—a pedagogical detail that persisted over many years as a component of a widely practiced ritual in Orthodox Jewish communities. This is *upsherin*, the ceremony of a 3-year-old boy's first haircut, which often concludes with the boy licking honey off the letters of the Hebrew alphabet as he learns them for the first time.

For important analytical context, this paper will first draw upon the works of ritual theorists such as Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner to establish how *upsherin* functions as a rite of passage which transitions an infant to boyhood—namely, from the maternal, domestic world to the patriarchal world of Torah study—and the complications therein. It will then closely examine *upsherin*'s honey-licking component as a sensorily rich ritual practice, amplifying its efficacy for children in particular. Lastly, it will look more broadly to the effects and implications of scripture-consumption practices in general, underscoring the Jewish view of scripture as not merely words on a page, but as multifaceted, sometimes paradoxically non-discursive, and to be wholly integrated into one's life. This endeavor will explore some of Judaism's main principles, its philosophy of initiation into the study of Torah and Talmud, and elements of Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism.

Upsherin as rite of passage

Halachically Speaking, a peer- (Rabbi-) reviewed publication compiled by Rabbi Moishe Dovid Lebovits, Rabbinical Administrator for the KOF-K Kosher Supervision, details in-depth the standard undertaking of the *upsherin* ritual:

> A male child's first haircut is called an *upsherin*… The mitzvah accomplished by cutting the hair is forming *peyos* on the child. … Many have the custom to cut the child's hair when the child reaches the age of three. Some say the reason for this age is because just as the first three years of fruits are off limits and the fruits of the fourth go to *Hashem*, a child is also "off limits" in his first three years since he can not speak as well, and in the fourth year when he begins to speak he is dedicated to *Hashem*. … It is proper for the

> father of the child to be present and cut the child's hair since he is obligated in the mitzvah. The custom seems to be that the mother of the child does not cut the hair. (1-6)

The haircutting aspect of the ritual is rather straightforward, but it is interesting (and will be useful in the later analysis) to see the various details and cultural rules surrounding the ceremony. One result of significant consequence of the ceremony itself, however, is the creation of *peyot*, the long sidelocks worn by many Orthodox Jews, which is considered both an important marker of identity as well as having important Kabbalistic meaning (Schapiro).

The ceremony as a whole can be readily examined under Arnold van Gennep's classic theory of rites of passage being marked by three separate phases, "*rites of separation*, *transition rites*, and *rites of incorporation*" (Grimes 530). At an elementary level, the ceremony first marks the phase of separation for the child, being taken from the maternal, domestic world to the patriarchal world of Torah study:

> At first, the child is taken from his mother at home. She is present only in the background, but he leaves his house and natural mother to become part of the male study circle of his Torah teacher and fellow students. As he grows, he will continue to leave home daily to go to school with other boys… the child's leaving home is a symbolic act of initial separation—he stops being a 'momma's boy' in order to become a novice Torah student. (Marcus 75)

The transition period occurs when the boy is wrapped in a *talit* (prayer shawl) and carried to the *cheder* (Jewish elementary school) by a parent, for the next stage of the ritual (which will be discussed in the next section):

> The custom is for the father to be the one to bring the child to *cheder*. When going with the child to *cheder* the child should be covered. The child is covered to ensure that he does not see any impure things (such as a dog, horse, or *goy*) on the day of his *upsherin*. The child should only be covered when he is going to *cheder* but not when he leaves. (Lebovits 7)

Ivan Marcus describes this transition in Victor Turner's phrase, "being betwixt and between":

> The journey from the private Jewish space of the home to the public Jewish space of the school or synagogue is a liminal or boundary zone, an in-between time in which harm may befall the child as well as the community. In Victor Turner's phrase, the person is "betwixt and between," no longer part of his prior status of being at home nor yet part of the social structure of life as a schoolboy. (76)

Upsherin as a rite of passage can also be seen in the explicit explanation of the ritual by DovBer Pinson, dean of the *Iyyun Yeshiva*:

> Clearly, a three year old boy undergoes a period of major transformation at this time; his journey from babyhood to childhood. During this time, he moves from his complete dependence on his mother to functioning as an independent being. (121-122)

This stage of incorporation ("functioning as an independent being") can be seen in part by the custom that the child does not wear the *talit* on his way back from *cheder.* Incorporation is only achieved after the ceremony is complete and the boy's body has been physically altered (his hair cut), and his new religious garb is worn:

> The custom is that a child does not wear *tzitzis* until he turns three. Although the *tzitzis* have no connection to the *yarmulka* or the *upsherin*, they are still put on for the first time the same day. (Lebovits 6)

Of course, such changes are primarily targeted at the surrounding community of adults, as it is doubtful that the child "feels" the aforementioned transition, or understands the importance of his new clothes (or even notices a change at all). While there may be some fabricated difference in social conditions (e.g. putting the child in school in the September of the third year of life), there are not realistically any distinct biological or physiological differences that occur on a child's third birthday, despite the following claims by Pinson:

> When the child nears his third year of life, on a developmental level, he enters a transitional stage, no longer a baby swaddled in diapers drinking a bottle, he is now a boy. He emerges from the sheltered comfort of the home and steps out into school, and is surrounded by friends in addition to his immediate family. (181-183)

Indeed, the child *cannot* simply start "functioning as an independent being" after his *upsherin*, nor does he immediately stop being in diapers or drinking from a bottle. The child must still go back to the domestic, maternal world that day and stay under the supervision of his mother until he gradually becomes independent. Vincent Crapanzano notes that, deceivingly, the *subject* of the ritual is often *not* what changes most, noting that with the example of circumcision, a child will still be a *child* depending on the context:

> Many scholars have succumbed to what can be called the ritual illusion… the assumption that what the ritual is said to do is in fact what it does. That a boy is treated as a man, for example, that he is declared to be a man, *in a particular ritual context* does not necessarily indicate what his treatment and conceptualization will be in other contexts. He may well be treated as a man, or a boy, or an infant—or as in all three in different contexts. (Grimes 120)

The case of *upsherin*, however, is an interesting one because the physical mark that it leaves on boys, namely, the remaining hair left to form the prevailing *peyot*, precisely *is* a distinct marker of Jewishness. Thus, the ceremony does indeed *work* to redefine the child's identity to everyone in his community and beyond, although, once again, the child may not realize it himself. Putting this in terms of Crapanzano's "rite of return," it could be argued that *upsherin,* the most widely recognized hair-cutting ceremony in Judaism, will later function to remind the subject of the ceremony (once he is older, perhaps at the sight of *peyot*) of the commonly lived experience of haircutting, perhaps endearing a sense of camaraderie with his fellow male community members.

Gone unmentioned so far, *gender* very clearly plays a large role in the structural basis of this ritual. As Caroline Bynum rightfully reminds us, Turner's arguments regarding rite of passage are predominantly founded on male-oriented principles, and are not truly universal to humans: "Turner's ideas involve in some way the insight that, in explaining human experience, one is explaining process or drama rather than structure, and that liminality or suspension of social and normative structures is a crucial moment in process" (Bynum; Grimes 75). It is easy to lose track of the power structures at play when following the 'drama' of the ritual so closely. What is both apparent and explicit is the notion that Orthodox Judaism expressly prohibits women from access to the world of Torah study (conversely, it can be argued that gender roles are so entrenched that women themselves 'choose' not to participate), a practice that is extremely highly valued in the Jewish tradition—e.g. being able to fulfill covenants with God, becoming closer to God, etc. But considering that *upsherin* in particular celebrates the *hair cutting* of a boy's surely very long hair (it cannot be cut before then), there appears to be very strong gender role normatization—if not outright gender bias—communicated, given that this event marks the induction of the child to potential for an ultimate, life-long spiritual culmination of an already very patriarchal religion. Even Pinson acknowledges the implicit gender-assignment that occurs during the ceremony:

> Up until a certain age, children feel themselves bodiless, genderless even, much like Adam and Chava (Adam and Eve) before becoming aware of their nakedness. … With regard to young children, when they are this way, without shame and with a desire to be appreciated as they are, the challenge of parents and friends is to honor and give young children that space for them to just be, without a definition. For a boy to just be, without needing to be a "boy". … From being a young genderless child, as it were, to becoming a boy at the age of three, parents begin to educate their child in the ways of a Torah observant boy. This is first done by cutting his head hair, leaving the *peyos* and putting on *Yarmulka*, otherwise known as a *kippa*/ headcovering and wearing *tzitzis*. The *upsherin* expresses the child becoming a boy, losing the longer, girl-like hair and assuming a shorter, more defined boy haircut. (238-241)

As Iris Parish explains in *Reading Jewish Women: Marginality and Modernization in Nineteenth-Century Eastern European Jewish Society*, however, female identity formation was just as much defined by the *lack* of alphabet schooling and *exclusion* from the realm of Torah:

> The traditional school system was also involved in the construction of gender identities for the girls and boys in Jewish society. As Daniel Boyarin has shown in his scholarship, Torah study played a substantial role in the construction of male identity, whereas the gender identity of females was constructed through their exclusion from this realm. Research leading to similar conclusions, conducted by Yoram Bilu, suggests that learning to read the Hebrew letters was an important part of the process of male identity construction. In his analysis of the "shearing" rite [*upsherin*], which usually attended the ceremony of entry to the *heder*, Bilu points out that in these rites of passage the boy is removed from his mother and introduced to the community of males through the act of

> cutting his hair, being taken off to the *heder* and symbolically eating the honey spread over the Hebrew Aleph-bet. Swallowing the honey, symbolically ingesting the sweetness of the Hebrew letters, ritually indicated the turning of the child into a man…One may say that the substantial role played in the formation of male identity by reading the Hebrew characters and studying Torah made it necessary for women to be entirely absent from these realms. (61)

As fascinating as this relationship and its potential for reciprocity are, the system is clearly still very coercive in defining gender roles. While males also do not have the choice and have enormous social pressures placed upon them, they still enjoy the position of privilege and power when it comes to the religious (*per se*) realm, sharing a special relationship, along with a gender, with their creator, the ostensibly objective and metaphysical goal of life. This topic is beyond the scope of this paper, however, but it is important to note how this ritual and its greater encapsulating tradition affects women and men's perception of them.

Licking the honey

At the *cheder*, after the haircut, the boy receives his first formal lesson. Sitting on the lap of his teacher, the boy is told to repeat the letters of the Hebrew alphabet after his teacher, who points them out on a tablet covered with honey. After repeating the sound of the letters, the boy is told to lick the honey off the tablet:

> At the *cheder* the child should be put on the *rabbi*'s lap. Using a *luach* with letters of the *aleph bet* written on it, the *rabbi* should read each letter with the child repeating after him… The *rabbi* should place honey on the letters and allow the child to lick the honey off of the letters… The reason for licking the honey is a *simon* that the *Torah* should be as sweet as honey to the child… One should bring a piece of cake to the child made from honey. This cake is eaten to open his heart to the *Torah*. Some write *pesukim* [verses] on the piece of cake, while others say this should not be done because one is erasing *Torah*. (Lebovits 7-8)

The *upsherin* ceremony of haircutting may seem unrelated to learning the alphabet, but as established earlier, it serves as a rite of passage for male infants crossing from babyhood to boyhood, marked by physical gender normatizations (e.g. having short hair), and ideological ones like 'entering the world of males.' This implies the beginnings of Torah study (also gendered) and therefore requires the teaching of the alphabet. But what, one might ask, does this have to do with food?

To begin, it ought to be considered that a three-year-old child's options for engaging with the Torah are already very limited. Unable to read, understand sophisticated words or terminology, or think reflectively beyond basic emotional or physical concerns, I argue that food (along with tasting and placing objects in one's mouth) thus remains a fundamental way that children can interact with and understand the world. Moreover, from a neurological perspective, a young child's education and memory for targeted actions can often be most influenced with

positive reinforcement conditioning, meaning that the child's supervisors have the choice of ideas and behaviors to reinforce and indoctrinate—in this case, the child is taught what is considered 'sacred' (Huston and Oitzl). Considering the boy's young age in conjunction with the sweet reward of honey given directly after correctly performing the 'sacred task,' a subconscious conditioning process could contribute to the child's internalized knowledge of sacred and profane and willingness to go to *cheder* in the future. There is even a Jewish saying that goes, "train the child according to His way, so also when he will get older, he won't turn away from it" (with there being a pun along the lines of "if you train a child when he's small to properly wear the *payot*, when he gets older, he will have a beard, and not take them off"), very strong evidence for the tradition being aware of taking advantage of young children's plasticity (Schapiro). The Hebrew letters, proximity to religious authority, and the notion of this kind of 'study' are all positively reinforced and sacralized. Food, then, becomes the medium through which these values are transmitted and embodied, literally.

With all of the senses involved—hearing the letter pronounced, seeing it, repeating it out loud, and smelling, touching, and tasting it—as well as being one of the child's first formal exercises in learning, the event is bound to make a lasting positive impression onto children who experience it. In *Deeply into the Bone*, Ronald Grimes uses this ritual specifically to demonstrate rituals' unique "capacity to evoke wonder" (132):

> Even though adults put boys through this rite, the adult teacher acts in concert with the child. The rite's importance is heightened by having it coincide with a seasonal celebration, the festival of Shavuot, which recollects the giving of the Torah to Moses. The beginning student sits on the teacher's lap; the relationship is tactile as well as auditory. The student's first taste of learning has actual flavor. His initial, formal encounter with words has body, density. Rich with gustatory resonance, how could such words not nourish? The student does not have to sit at a desk. What joy! He sways back and forth and sings his lessons—all with his teacher's approval. What child would not come home wonderstruck?
>
> This Ashkenazic school initiation rite was displaced by bar mitzvah, a less sensual ceremony… But imagine the consequences of retrieving or reinventing a beginning school rite inspired by this practice. Our schools would have a difficult time living up to the promises implicit in the ceremony. (132-33)

This ritual has the somewhat mystical component of being primarily sensory, and providing an understanding of Torah in a way that is nonlinear and beyond discursive conceptualization. Torah, in Orthodox and Hasidic traditions, is not just a sacred text, but *a way of life*, and is meant to be deeply integrated into ordinary activity. Thus, in this 'wondrous' sense of the ceremony, such a peculiar, tactile, and highly socially validated experience associated with the Hebrew letters and the acquisition of new religious status might, again, be the best (and perhaps *only* way) to introduce such a young child to his community's understanding of Torah and God. The sensory-based mechanism allows the child to explicitly make the connection between Judaism as

a religious undertaking and the Jewish community as supportive to his growth and learning. It begins, at a very early stage, to build intimate and wondrous relationships between Torah study and his teacher(s), fellow students, and ultimately, himself, his religion, and God.

Note how this ritual seems to encompass components of both "body and mind"—the sensory and intellectual—simultaneously. This link is not insignificant. In fact, ritual symbolic meaning was seen by Turner to exist primarily on two poles, "ideological" on one end, "sensory" on the other. He argues that it is this sensory aspect that is most powerful in evoking emotion in practicers. Pamela Klassen explains:

> Turner's theory of ritual is highly focused on symbols and artifacts and natural elements that evoke emotional responses, personal memories, and social connections. Viewing symbols as the "basic unit of ritual," Turner argued that what he called "dominant symbols" have three formative properties: (1) they *condense* "many things and actions" into one representation; (2) they *unify* "disparate" significata" along lines of association that are either factual or perceived; and (3) they have two *poles of meaning*, which they mediate: the *ideological pole* of moral and social orders, and the *sensory pole* of natural and bodily elements. … It is at the sensory force where emotions enter in with their fullest force, brought on by 'those significata that may be expected to arouse desires and feelings.' (The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Emotion; John Corrigan; 146)

The "dominant symbol," of course, is the tablet with the alphabet, as well as the *cheder* itself and the boy's teacher. The "sensory" pole in this case is quite clear—the tasting, smelling, and seeing of the letters—and is once again magnified by the subject being a child, since in general their senses are new to them and most things in the world are seemingly interesting.

The "ideological" pole of the ritual traverses a halo of concepts that include manhood, Torah, and spirituality, but also literacy, study, and curiosity. Marcus explains the importance of literacy (making reference to the prophet Ezekiel's vision which will be examined in the next section): "The ceremony, in effect, compares the child's beginning to study the written words of God with the prophet Ezekiel's initiation into receiving the words of God. This comparison is appropriate when one considers that the sages viewed themselves as the successors to the biblical prophets, and that literacy is the first step toward becoming a Torah scholar" (Marcus 56).

Victoria Hanna, an Orthodox Jewish performer, singer, and researcher on ancient Jewish songs, reiterates the importance of letters in the Jewish tradition, and describes her unique experience with this very sensory phenomena of letters and sounds as such:

> …The whole house was full of books, letters. There is a feeling, almost, that you want to touch the books, you want to smell them. When you look at the letters, you don't only look for meaning, you *drink* the letters with your eyes. In the Jewish tradition, the letters are not separated from the meaning, and the meaning is not separated from the *physical existence*, and from the *sound*. … A child, when he's three years old (before, he is only with his mother), she almost sacrifices him to the world outside, and his first meeting is with a rabbi to teach him the alphabet. They put honey on the letters; he needs to *lick* the

> letters, he's eating cake with the form of the letters, and he starts to pronounce the letters as if he's eating them, as if they become a part of his body. … The *letters* and the *language* are so vivid… (Hanna, *Hebrew Vowels Demonstration*)

Hanna goes on to demonstrate the link between the experience of the *sound* of each Hebrew vowel and consonant, their *visual* representation on a page, and their location in one's mouth. She deconstructs words and phrases and maps her understanding of their meaning to their "choreography of sounds"—for example, the word "I" in English, or "ANI" in Hebrew, for her is the juxtaposition of the very private "ee" (אִ) sound with the very open and expansive "aah" (אָ) sound, which she explains is articulating one's relationship to the world. Widening the field in this way, Hanna's seemingly mystical experience with letter forms and sounds begs a broader analysis.

'Consuming' scripture more generally

The honey-licking practice's connection with *upsherin* is in fact relatively recent. The earliest mention of *upsherin* as a formal ceremony was found in a Kabbalistic text written by Rabbi Chaim Vital, who lived at the turn of the 17th century, called *Sha'ar HaKavonot* (Marcus 36). In the text, the *upsherin* ceremony is already mentioned as a tradition. Conversely, the practice of honey-licking specifically as a pedagogical tool for learning letters has been recorded by Rabbi Yitzchok Luria (1534-1572) in the Lurianic Kabbalah from the Arizal (Marcus 39). Several other consumption rituals of a similar vein—and a more general one concerning letters of honey—were described by R. Eleazar b. Judah of Worms (ca. 1160-1230). Examples include practices which involve honey cakes with scripture adorned on top of them, bread with scripture inscribed into its crust, leaves of myrtle, fig, or olive trees with scripture written into them and eaten directly or dissolved into wine, or hard-boiled and roasted eggs with scripture written on the shell (Marcus 27-28). Where did this idea of ritual consumption of foods come from?

It first seems most natural to start at arguably the most famous analysis of food practices in Judaism, pertaining to Kosher food laws. As argued by Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger*, food is a strong, socially-inherited indicator for distinguishing sacred and profane, a medium through which everyday activities can be done in a specific way to distinguish them from ordinary tasks (63). Using the laws of *kashrut* (Kosher food laws) as her case study, she argues that the constant distinction made between categories of animals (including those fit for consumption and those that are not, and the ritual that surrounds changing such a condition) is fundamental to reinforcing one's understanding of their individual, group, and spatial identity. Similarly, for the child in the ceremony, the honey cakes are not like any other cakes, and can and must only be eaten after his first lesson. Explicitly involving *words* in particular compounds this effect, as words most clearly and immediately delineate concepts and ideas from others. Having certain words accompanied by certain foods thus denotes sacredness with extraordinary gravity.

But looking more specifically to the association between food and study, we find that the link is interestingly common across many cultures—English, to take one familiar example, has idioms such as 'food for thought,' 'digesting' what one learns, 'ruminating' when one deliberates, or 'regurgitating' learned material, and parents even give children alphabet noodle soup in hopes of teaching them the alphabet (Marcus 54). In pursuing the connection between eating, studying, and divine knowledge in Judaism, Marcus guides us to Hellenistic Judaism's adoption of acquiring salvation through study:

> In ancient Judaism, each side of the study-as-eating equation was given several specific meanings. The objects of one's study was to be the Torah as the word of God, and the foods that were compared to the Torah tended to be specific as well: honey, milk, oil, and flour (bread, cake)…When Judaism adopted the Hellenistic ideal of studying sacred knowledge as a means to achieve personal salvation, the scriptural images that compared acquiring God's words to ingesting them were applied to the study of the written text. This association, which was eventually interpreted ritually as the actual eating of [inscribed] foods to enable one magically to study Torah and not forget it, was based on the biblical theme that God puts His words into the mouth of His prophets. (p. 54)

The idea of knowledge as divine pursuit becomes more articulated, most especially when, after the destruction of the Second Temple and faced with diaspora, Rabbinic Judaism further understood Torah study as a crucially important virtue (Marcus 44). This 'knowledge' can also often transcend symbolic understanding to *embodied*, *intuitive*, understanding, as implied in the proverb (again related to eating and honey): "My son, eat honey, for it is good; let its sweet drops be on your palate. Know: such is wisdom for your soul" (Prov. 24:13-14a; cf. Ps. 19:11).

Marcus' final note regarding the pattern of prophets accepting God's words as food is a fascinating one, and there are many such examples throughout the Bible. The most striking one is of course the vision of

> Ezekiel, who takes the image to a new literal dimension by envisioning himself actually eating God's words and then adding that God's words taste sweet: "He said to me, 'Mortal, eat what is offered you; eat this scroll, and go speak to the House of Israel.' So I opened my mouth, and He gave me this scroll to eat, as He said to me, 'Mortal, feed your stomach and fill your belly with this scroll that I give you.' I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey to me" (Ez. 3:1-3). (p. 54)

Like in the letter-learning ritual, Ezekiel's metaphoric vision includes honey and the consumption of scripture. His vision incorporates the physical integration of God's word with the body. Put in context of the importance of text, letters, and Torah study previously raised, this is a rather striking episode exploring both mysticism and radical symbolic inversion. I contend that the more general practice of consuming letters, words, and scripture has these qualities, and therefore requires a shift in understanding of standard symbolic and semiotic frameworks.

Under standard semiotic theories such as those advanced by Peirce or Saussure, ordinary words are signs with single concepts as their objects, and inciting a response in its interpretant. But Torah study, texts like the *Talmud*, and disciplines like *Kabbalah* seek to multiply the object and interpretant constituents of a word or phrase.

This becomes apparent in practices which present the existence of encrypted messages in the Bible, hiding 'deeper' meaning from plain sight within the same text itself. One notable example is *gematria*, which is a system of extrapolating meaning from the numerology assigned to letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and the use of symbolic mathematics (e.g. multiplying a certain number by two because there physically exist two; equating or otherwise deriving insight from two concepts because the sum of their letters is the same.) Another (more simple) example is the naming convention of God in the Bible. God is revealed to be named "YHVH" (יהוה), but the the term thereafter to refer to God is *hashem* (literally translating to "the name"). Simplistically, this equates God with a linguistic concept. Moreover, the other common name for God in the Bible, *adonai*, has the grammatical suffix for a plural noun, despite the very strong insistence that the Jewish god is *one*. This, again, indicates a special, unusual relationship between the *word* for God as a linguistic construct, and its actual referent (God *as such*). As one final example of discovering God as existing literally *in words*, Rabbi Nissan D. Dubov claims that

> the *Talmud* extrapolates a hidden meaning from the very first Hebrew word of the Ten Commandments, 'anochi' which translates as 'I am the Lord your God.' The Hebrew letters of the word 'anochi' are an acronym that stands for the Hebrew words, 'I placed Myself in the writing,' meaning that God 'compressed' Himself into the words of the Bible. (Dubov)

The examples are countless. It is thus apparent that the role of words and symbols in the Jewish tradition are not as clear as they may be in ordinary usage, especially when referring to God.

Knowing, therefore, that the 'reality' of words of scripture can abstractly exist on many different planes higher than their naive meanings, existing both in the mind and in God, having words of scripture in *physical, edible form* is a radical inversion of the typical linguistic mechanism. Ritual consumption of scripture demonstrates, on some level, divine intervention—the physical manifestation of symbols. The ritual in effect reverses the two planes: the symbols (the words) become *objects* of the ritual, where they would usually serve to *point to* the object, and become real. Words—the abstract, the holy—become real and physical, which is related to Kabbalistic theory that performing *mitzvot* (Biblical duties) in fact performs certain actions in the heavens above. Eating of scripture, even symbolically, is a conflation of the two, and the result is an episode similar to the prophets like Ezekiel.

At the same time, the transformation of the physical into symbol occurs as well. While baking bread with scripture on it is an introduction of God (or a reification of the symbolic forms of God) into the physical plane, the holy bread also legitimizes the metaphors of scripture as both spiritual and physical sustenance. But through reification and consumption, it is not only the

Torah that 'nourishes' people, but people that 'nourish' and sustain the Torah by giving it physical manifestation and consuming, embodying, and acquiring its hidden wisdoms, providing for it a vessel to carry God's will and the study of Torah as a *mitzvah*. This brings to light a more reciprocal, dialectic, and therefore unified system of human and deity roles in Judaism.

Conclusion

From the lesser-known, unusual, and perhaps, for some, the whimsical practice of licking honey off of a tablet with the alphabet letters on it, we have considered whether there exists a form of divine incarnation in Judaism. The emic Jewish paradigm of scripture as code, and knowledge as a divine pursuit makes the symbolic field of Judaism vast, and allows theorists to rethink many aspects of Judaism taken for granted. Looking to the history and tradition, as well as the practice today allows the discovery of original theoretical directions, and at the same time learn more about our own culture. To steal Ivan Marcus' last, powerful idea, the connection between these Medieval European Jewish practices and modern Western culture today is ever-present, even in the time of year that we begin school:

> The custom of giving schoolchildren honey cakes is no longer associated with the Shavuot holiday in the spring but now comes at Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, in the fall. This custom is a merging of two separate food symbols. Since in Jewish tradition the New Year is thought to be the anniversary of the day the world was created, marking it by eating honey was understood to represent that the entire cosmos was a divine gift. But honey need not be given to children in for the form of a sweetened cake. In Ashkenaz, adults customarily eat red apples and honey. The honey cake is a faint trace of the medieval school initial rite. And since school children begin their studies in September, the associations of honey with school and with the Jewish New Year have been merged – a quite contemporary equation of honey cakes and Torah. (127)

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