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פרשת שמיני How God was Sanctified through Nadav and Avihu's Death

After the shocking death of Nadav and Avihu, Moses says to Aaron that this is what God meant when he said, "through those near to me I will sanctify Myself." Rashi, Rashbam, and Nahmanides struggle to understand the meaning of Moses' message.

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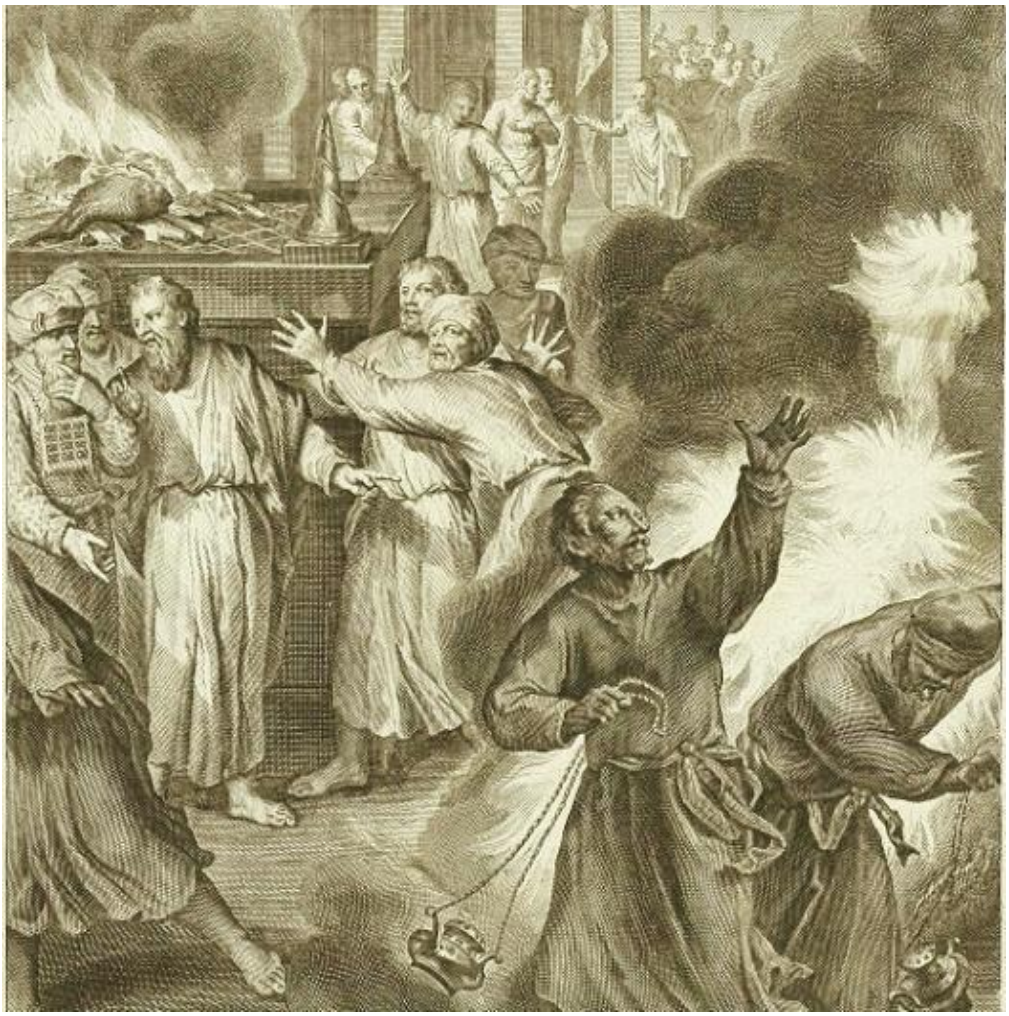

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Part 1

The Consecration of the Tabernacle: From Celebration to Mourning

The consecration of the Tabernacle (*mishkan*) in the wilderness after the Israelites' miraculous escape from Egypt should have been a purely joyful event. It was poised to signal both a concrete break with an oppressive subjugated past and optimistically anticipate an autonomous future revolving around Israel's own cultic centre and an exclusive covenant with their God.

For an instant, this was indeed the case. The inaugural sacrifices celebrating the Tabernacle's completion climaxed with a spectacular expression of divine approval, communal revelry, and pious solemnity (Leviticus 9:24):

ויקרא ט:כד וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי יְ-הוָֹה וַתֹּאכַל עַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ אֶת הָעֹלָה וְאֶת הַחֲלָבִים וַיַּרְא כָּל הָעָם וַיָּרֹנּוּ וַיִּפְּלוּ עַל פְּנֵיהֶם:	Lev 9:24 A fire (then) came forth fire from before YHWH, and devoured upon the altar the burnt-offering and the fat; and when all the people saw it, they shouted, and fell on their faces (NJPS with adjustments).

And yet this premiere event of national celebration is immediately marred by an affront to God, rejection, death, and grief. Jubilation turns into anguish when Aaron's sons initiate their own sacrifices prompting an identically spectacular, yet this time vicious, divine response (Lev. 10:2):

ויקרא י:ב וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי יְ-הוָֹה וַתֹּאכַל אוֹתָם וַיָּמֻתוּ לִפְנֵי יְ-הוָֹה:	Lev 10:2 And there came forth fire from before YHWH, and devoured them, and they died before YHWH."

The precise replication of a divine conflagration (וַתֵּצֵא אֵשׁ מִלִּפְנֵי יְ-הוָֹה וַתֹּאכַל) which describes divine consumption of both the animal sacrifices and Aaron's children in exactly the same terms invites some unseemly analogy. This flagrant juxtaposition of simultaneous divine acceptance and rejection stimulated much rabbinic exegetical activity.

What did Nadav and Avihu Not Do?!

The narrative overtly attributes Nadav and Avihu's deaths to their own dedication of the Tabernacle with an "alien fire" (NJPS), or "unauthorized coals" (Milgrom).[1] The myriad of both modern critical and rabbinic interpretations to determine the precise meaning of the phrase only serve to accentuate the ambiguity involved.[2] Opinions range across a wide spectrum of "crimes" we might classify in modern terms as political, cultic, ethical, mystical, or even breaches of social convention. They include rebellion to usurp Moses' and Aaron's authority, disrespect, drunkenness, bachelorhood, childlessness, wearing of improper priestly vestments, sacral procedural anomalies like omitting the washing of hands, unobstructed viewing of the divine presence, extending even to as minor an ethical infraction as discourtesy in failing to consult each other prior to their dedication.[3]

A Theological Problem More than a Textual Problem

These numerous solutions reflect attempts to come to terms with a gut-wrenching narrative involving divinely sanctioned deaths of the most prominent spiritual figures, struck down violently at a moment of supreme spiritual achievement.

This frenzy of midrashic activity reflects the age-old theological enterprise known as theodicy, the justification of a benevolent God by reconciling His goodness with what appears as injustice and undeserved suffering in the

world.

An early midrash conveys this problem in a most graphic way by considering the horror felt by Job, the paradigmatic biblical personage dealing with the theodicy problem, whose "heart quakes and leaps from its place," (Job 37:1) as a reaction over this injustice:

טיטוס הרשע נכנס לבית קדשי הקדשים וגידד שתי הפרכות ויצא בשלום ובניו של אהרן נכנסו להקריב ויצאו שרופים!	"The evil Titus entered the Holy of Holies, ripped apart its curtains, and was left intact, while Aaron's sons entered to offer sacrifices and left as ashes!"[4]

That these opinions reflect something far beyond discovering their "actual" meaning in the context of its ancient Near Eastern setting is evident in their near disregard for what the text explicitly states.

Keli Yeqar: So blatant is this exegetical elision that it prompted R. Shlomoh Ephraim Luntschitz (1550-1619), another seminal rabbinic thinker and author of the renowned Torah commentary *Keli Yeqar,* to don his critical scholarly cap for an instant, and remark regarding the phrase "they offered before YHWH אש זרה, which He had not enjoined upon them," from Lev 10:1:

הרי מקרא זה מכחיש כל הדעות ההם.	This verse controverts all of these interpretations.

Part 2

Moses and Aaron's Ambiguous Exchange

A Contextual Appreciation of Rashi, Rashbam, and Ramban

The terse exchange between Moses and Aaron in response to these tragic and inexplicable deaths, like the actual cause of the deaths, is shot through with an ambiguity that also fuels a vigorous debate among the most prominent medieval Jewish biblical exegetes. The Torah records the pithy exchange as follows:

ויאמר משה אל אהרן הוא אשר דבר י-הוה לאמר בקרבי אקדש ועל פני כל העם אכבד וידם אהרן.	Moses said to Aaron, "This is what YHWH meant when He said: 'Through those near to Me I will sanctify Myself, and be glorified before all the people.'" And Aaron was silent.

Rashi's Interpretation:
Death was a Sanctification of God

The interpretation of Rashi (R. Shlomo Yitzhaqi, 1040-1105), has traditionally dominated and became the focal target of opposing views. As with many of Rashi's readings, a textual problem stimulates his explication. In this case, taking the statement *this is what God spoke of* literally, he hones in on the apparently unfounded claim asserted by Moses to have been privy to God's words. If this is a direct quotation, it is impossible to locate in the earlier Torah text–thus Rashi's question: "Where did He [God] speak this?"

Basing himself on a talmudic source (b. *Zevachim* 115b), his quest leads him to the textually distant verse Exodus 29:43, layered by following rationale:

רשי ויקרא י:ג "הוא אשר דבר וגו'" – היכן דבר ונועדתי שמה לבני ישראל ונקדש בכבודי (שמות כט מג). אל תקרי בכבודי	Rashi Lev 10:3 "This is what He meant…" Where did He speak this? "And there I will meet with the children of Israel; and [the Tent] shall be sanctified by My glory" (Exod 29:43)." Do not read it "by My glory," but

אלא במכובדי. אמר לו משה לאהרן אהרן אחי יודע הייתי שיתקדש הבית במיודעיו של מקום והייתי סבור או בי או בך, עכשיו רואה אני שהם גדולים ממני וממך.	rather "by My glorified ones." Moses said to Aaron, "Aaron, my brother, I knew that the House would be sanctified by those intimate with God, and I believed it would be either by me or you, but now I see that they [Nadav and Avihu] are greater than both you and I."
"וידם אהרן" – קבל שכר על שתיקתו. ומה שכר קבל, שנתייחד עמו הדיבור	"And Aaron was silent" – And Aaron was rewarded for his silence. What was the reward he received? God addressed him confidentially.

Rashi locates a prooftext for Moses' citation in an unrelated biblical context in Exodus, regarding God's assurance that He will grace the Tent of Meeting with His presence within the wilderness camp. Rashi then adopts a midrashic resolution of the "problem" by using a classic rabbinic interpretive practice called אל תקרי – *do not read it [as it is written], read it as follows [usually a word play on the text]* – that vastly expands the hermeneutical range of biblical language.[5]

In this re-reading, Moses assures Aaron that God values the deaths of his sons as a sacrifice for a greater good, which is the sanctification of God. Aaron's silence gestures his deference to Moses' glorification of his sons' martyrdom by refraining from public grieving. Aaron's suppression of the visceral emotions naturally expected from any parent suffering such devastating loss, privileges him to his own private audience with God.[6] Rashi's interpretation of Moses' "consolation" is premised on God's categorical endorsement of the sanctification of God through the deaths of the righteous beyond the particular circumstances of Nadav and Avihu by his interpretation of the second half of Moses' assertion, *and I am glorified before all the people*, which emphasizes its public effect.

כשהקב"ה עושה דין בצדיקים מתייירא ומתעלה ומתקלס.	When God punishes the righteous He becomes feared, exalted, and acclaimed.

In other words, dying for God is a public relations coup for God's eminence and worthiness as an object of adoration and worship.

God's Need for Martyrs in Rashi, Philo, and the Zohar

For Rashi, the death of Aaron's sons advances the cause of God and religion, providing a vivid historical paradigm of God's inherent need for martyrs, as well as the human need for them, to reinforce and reassure one's own faith in God. Rashi's interpretation is buttressed both earlier in Jewish intellectual history by the ancient philosopher Philo, who viewed Aaron's son's deaths as "perfect burnt offerings,"[7] and later, by the Zohar, the canonical text of Kabbalah, which cites their deaths as an endorsement of the notion that the deaths of the righteous constitute a form of atonement.[8]

Why Rashi is Not *Peshat*

Rashi's interpretation however, is both philologically and contextually problematic.

- **No Source for Quote**: As Rashi admits, the Torah itself contains no explicit source for the quotation attributed to God. This is the most serious problem.
- **ידם Does Not Mean "Comfort":** The root of the Hebrew rendered by Rashi as a silent unresponsive gesture of accord with Moses' assertion often connotes a response that is anything but acquiescence.

Exodus	תִּפֹּל עֲלֵיהֶם אֵימָתָה וָפַחַד בִּגְדֹל	Terror and dread descend upon them, through the might of Your arm

15:16	זְרוֹעַ֔ יִדְּמ֖וּ כָּאָ֑בֶן	they are **stilled** as stone.
Amos 5:13	הַמַּשְׂכִּ֤יל בָּעֵת֙ הַהִ֣יא יִדֹּ֔ם כִּ֥י עֵ֖ת רָעָ֥ה הִֽיא	Thus the prudent man is **silent**, for it is an evil time.

The Egyptians might be petrified at the splitting of the Sea, but they are not resigned to it. The prudent observer might be outraged or rendered speechless by the evil time, but he certainly does not condone it, and is not comforted by it. Thus, Aaron's silence might also express astonishment at his brother's, at best, insipid attempt at comfort.[9]

Rashbam: Aaron Complies with the Halachic Imperative not to Mourn

As often happened, Rashi's view was challenged by other major biblical exegetes. His own grandson, Rashbam, notorious for disavowing his grandfather's midrashic approach in favor of the *sensus literalis* or *peshat,* categorically rejects his midrashic interpretation of Moses' "comfort."

האגדה שאו' שהיה מנחמו משה לאהרן... אין זה לפי הפשט. וכי היה מבשר הק' למשה עשו לי משכן ובו ביום ימותו הגדולים שבכם	The *aggada* that says that Moses was comforting Aaron... This is not according to the *peshat*. Would God really have said to Moses, "Make me a Tabernacle, and on the day you do, two of your greatest will die"?!

According to Rashbam, Moses' response pertains to the laws of mourning which calls for the High Priest to refrain from overt expressions of bereavement.

וידום אהרן – מאבילותו ולא בכה ולא התאבל... וזהו מוסר ואמיתת פשוטו.	"And Aaron was silent" – from his mourning, and he did not cry or mourn... and this was proper behavior, and this is the true *peshat*.

It is Aaron, not his sons, that is the subject of sanctifying God, by the heroic manner he conducts himself in response,

ועל פני כל העם אכבד – זהו כבוד שכינה שרואה בניו מתים ומניח אבלו בעבודת בוראו.	"And be glorified before all the people" – For this is a glorification of the divine Presence, seeing his sons die and yet displacing his grief for the sake of worshipping his Creator.

Moses, the lawgiver, determines the applicability of divine law in this situation, which places Aaron, as High Priest, in a different halakhic category than normally pertains. Such is indicated, Rashbam notes further, by the laws that specifically restrict the High Priest from actions normally associated with mourning like dishevelled hair and rending garments, as well as coming into contact with corpses even if they belonged to immediate relatives (Lev 21:10-11). Aaron, the dedicated disciple of Moses and servant of God, complies with Mosaic stricture

Nahmanides: Moses Interprets God's Will and Aaron Silences Himself

Another of the great medieval commentators, the seminal thirteenth century Geronese kabbalist, Talmudist, and exegete Moses ben Nahman (Nahmanides, 1194-1270), offers an entirely different perspective. As is often the case in his commentary, Nahmanides trenchantly critiques Rashi's explication. In particular, he targets

Rashi's convoluted location of the divine source for Moses' claim that the tabernacle would be eventually sanctified by martyrs, and provides a credible alternative hermeneutic that allows for a wider semantic range to the key biblical term in question- *dibber*.

Nahmanides demonstrates philologically that in addition to its literal sense of "spoke," the term ד-ב-ר bears a figurative one that denotes "His decrees, His thought, and the manner of His ways."[10] In addition to its most common oral sense of speaking out loud, the term "dibber" can also refer to unspoken thoughts and intentions. In other words, Moses did not cite God verbatim, but rather offered his own understanding of the manner in which God governs the world. Aaron concedes, this time to his brother's understanding of God's ways, and, according to Nahmanides, poignantly expresses his compliance by abruptly and overtly repressing his natural fatherly reaction,

שהיה בוכה בקול, ואז שתק. For he was crying loudly and then suddenly silenced himself.

Three Images of Moses: Prophet, Posek, Theologian

Thus, among these three seminal medieval *parshanim*, three very different depictions of Moses emerge in his attempt to rationalize the deaths of Nadav and Avihu to Aaron, their father and his brother.

Rashi, in his literal understanding of Moses' citing God's communication, presents us with Moses as *prophet,* as the mediator of God's direct word.

Rashbam, in contrast, views Moses in his capacity as a rabbinic *posek* or halakhic decisor, issuing a ruling regarding the specific mourning practices that would relate to Aaron's unique position as High Priest.

Nahmanides views him as a kind of *theologian*, who, because of his extraordinary proximity to God, understands the nature of God's providence.

In Rashi's view, Moses is the scribe who cites verbatim, while in Rashbam's view, Moses is *rabbenu* who interprets, guides, and instructs halakhically, and in Nahmanides' view, he is a *Rabbi*, sermonizing on the spiritual lesson of a historical event.[11]

Contextualizing the Three Approaches

All of the commentators discussed struggle with and against the text in order to resolve pressing theological and existential crises. Their encounters with the Hebrew Bible continue in the vein of ancient interpretation that, as James Kugel noted, "had a stake in what the text would end up saying," as opposed to "merely a cold, objective search for the truth about the text."[12]

The three primary perspectives examined may also be products of disparate historical weltanschauungs.

Rashi – A Post-Crusader View on Martyrdom

Rashi continued to live for almost a decade after the decimation of French communities during the First Crusades in 1096. He certainly was aware of the painful episodes of Jewish parents murdering their own children rather than leaving them to face forced baptisms. Though it is difficult to determine with certainty, it is not implausible to infer that Rashi's consideration of the children's deaths in our passage in Leviticus as a *qiddush hashem* may have been shaped by these horrifying events, imagining them as biblical precedents for the literal sacrifice of children in his own time *al qiddush haShem*.[13]

Rashbam – The Halakhist

From a historical point of view, Rashbam's perspective may have been shaped by very different circumstances. Jewish communities were not as decimated during the Second Crusades, as they were in the First during Rashi's lifetime, nor was there any self-martyrdom as there was in the First. The single narrative of Jewish experience in the Second Crusade actually "minimizes the depiction of martyrdom and instead foregrounds the effective strategies for Jewish survival employed during this crusade."[14]

From a methodological perspective, Rashbam lived his life primarily as an eminent Tosafist whose dominant preoccupation was a dialectical engagement exclusively with the Talmud and its juristic complexities.[15] Although Rashi, of course, was also a halakhist, his midrashic bent when it came to his biblical interpretation, led him down an entirely different exegetical road that has no regard for context. Rashbam, however, is far more attuned to the context.

Though also not averse at times to interpreting the bible contra accepted halakhic norms,[16] in this passage he finds a perfect confluence of biblical halakha and context. The rationale for those laws prohibiting the High Priest from mourning rites and defilement on contact with the dead is stated explicitly so that "he does not profane the sanctuary" (Lev 21:12) Thus reading "sanctifying" as refraining from mourning would be the opposite of overt mourning and "profaning." There could be nothing more sublime for Rashbam than a Moses displaying his halakhic acumen in a difficult situation where the narrative context calls for it.

Nahmanides – The Kabbalist

Nahmanides, on the other hand, is one of the most prominent medieval pioneers of Kabbalah, Judaism's mystical tradition. A staple of that tradition is the esoteric knowledge of the inner dynamics of the Godhead, and the relationship that pertains between its various components known as *sefirot*, both internally and externally with the material world. Thus, he views Moses as expounding on a particular aspect of Gods' governance in this situation, which he is qualified to do because of his intimate knowledge with all the divine channels of providence.[17]

Conclusion: Existential Struggles Underpinning the *Parshanut*

When we examine the various exegetical positions of major biblical *parshanim* such as these it is important to be mindful that they are not, even if they say so, struggling to find the *peshat* in the sense of the original meaning of the text. Their commentaries reflect both existential struggles with, and different exegetical and philosophical approaches to, a living text that seek to draw out the divine voice long ago silenced, yet pulsating underneath its surface.

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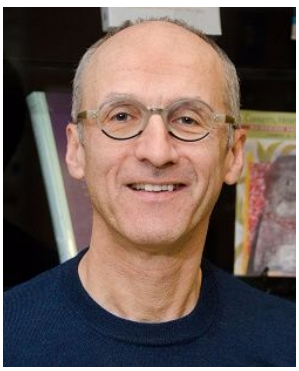

Philosophy and Jewish Thought for best book in 4 years (2008) as well as the Canadian Jewish Book Award. His most recent book, *Maimonides and the Shaping of the Jewish Canon* (Cambridge, 2014), argues that Maimonides' philosophy and jurisprudence has become an integral part of the Jewish canon alongside the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud.

[1] Jacob Milgrom *Leviticus 1-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 598. He argues that the other attestations to the sin in Num 3:4; .23:61, and the LXX support this translation.

[2] For a good overview of the various alternatives offered in biblical scholarship see John Laughlin, "The Strange Fire of Nadab and Abihu," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95.4 (1976): 559-565, but as he states, "The original event which gave rise to this story may never be recovered" (p. 562). See also Ed Greenstein's TABS essay, "The Incident of Nadav and Avihu: A Mysterious Transgression or a Mysterious Deity?"

[3]For an overview of all the various rabbinic suggestions see Avigdor Shinan, "The Sins of Nadav and Avihu in Rabbinic Literature," *Tarbiz* 48 (1978-79) pp. 201-214 (Heb.).

[4] *Pesiqta deRav Kahana*, ed. Mandelbaum, 27, *Aharei Mot*.

[5] This technique is often used for minor textual emendations mostly involving vowel letters. See I. Heinemann, *Darkeh Ha-Aggadah* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1970), 127-129. However, this instance is an example of what Salo Baron described as not intended "to impugn the authenticity of the accepted version," but rather as toying "with the richness of the Hebrew vocabulary which, by a slight turn, could yield entirely new implications." See *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, vol. VI, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 166.

[6] God's regard for Aaron compensates for the loss of his children with a kind of measure for measure reward. Aaron unquestioningly accepts his brother's report of a divine communication no one else but Moses was privy to, and so he himself becomes a recipient in turn of a divine address to which no one else, including Moses, had immediate access.

[7] *De Allegoriis Legum*, ii. 15, ed. Cohn and Wendland, p. 101

[8] *Zohar*, vol 3, 56a.

[9] This sense conforms to the Septuagint translation of it as "his heart was pricked", or "shocked", depicting Aaron as stupefied and perhaps open to the inference that he was deeply wounded, rather than comforted.

[10]

ולדעתי בדרך הפשט אין צורך לכל זה, כי דבר השם, גזרותיו ומחשבותיו וענין דרכיו, והדבור יאמר בכל אלה, דברתי אני עם לבי (קהלת א טז), חשבתי מחשבה זו וכן ותהי אשה לבן אדוניך כאשר דבר ה' (שם כד נא), גזר...והנה אמר משה, המקרה הזה הוא אשר גזר השם לאמר אל לבו, בקרובי אקדש, שלא יהרסו אל קדושתי, ועל פני כל העם אכבד, שיהיו נוהגים כבוד במשכני:

[11] Regardless of their exegetical models, Rashbam's and Nahmanides' alternative approaches allow for a more nuanced sense of Aaron's silence to emerge that is consistent with the Septuagint and the typical connotations of the Hebrew word וידם. It might then convey an anguished or conflicted emotional response, reflected in Aaron's subsequent willingness to challenge a different ruling of Moses later in the story.

[12]James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007)

p.137.

[13]See for example E. M. Lipschutz, *Sefer Rashi*, ed, Rabbi Y. L. Hacohen Maimon (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1957) p. 285 and Harvey Sicherman, Gilad J. Gevaryahu, "Rashi and the First Crusade: Commentary, Liturgy, Legend," *Judaism* 48:2 (1999) pp.181-197.

[14] Chaviva Levin, "Constructing Memories of Martyrdom: Contrasting Portrayals of Martyrdom in the Hebrew Narratives of the First and Second Crusade," in *Remembering the Crusades: Myth, Image, and Identity,* eds., Nicholas Paul, Suzanne Yaeger (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012)pp.50-69, at p.53

[15]See Ephraim Kanarfogel, *"Peering Through the Lattices": Mystical, Pietistic, and Magical Dimensions in the Tosafist Period* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000) p.186.

[16] The classic example is Rashbam's comment on Gen. 1:5 that the day described in the creation account begins in the morning rather than in the evening as understood in the rabbinic tradition. See Zev Farber's TABS essay, "Can the Torah Contradict Halacha?"

[17] As Nahmanides describes Moses in in his Introduction to his commentary on Genesis, he was possessed of the absolute limits of human knowledge which consisted of 49 "gates of understanding" וכבר אמרו רבותינו חמשים שערי בינה נבראו בעולם וכלם נמסרו למשה חוץ מאחד .