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“IN GOD’S HANDS”: THE RELIGIOUS PHENOMENOLOGY OF R. MORDECHAI YOSEF OF IZBICA

The teachings of R. Mordechai Yosef of Izbica (1800-1854) lay dormant, studied only by a handful of Hasidim in Poland and later in Israel, for nearly one hundred and fifty years. In the last twenty-five years or so, we have experienced an explosion of interest in this most powerful and profound Hasidic master. He has become famous for teachings which seem at odds with traditional Jewish beliefs. There are those who even claim that R. Mordechai Yosef's work, the *Mei ha-Shiloah* (henceforth *MH*) was actually consigned to the flames as a consequence of perceived heretical doctrines.¹ Some contend that the fact that the title page of the *MH* Vol. I shows the work was published outside of Poland (Vienna) by a non-Jewish publisher indicates the controversy with which R. Mordechai Yosef's teachings were received.² R. Gershon Henoah of Radzin, the grandson of R. Mordechai Yosef and the actual editor of the first volume of the *MH*, was keenly aware of the novelty of his grandfather's teachings when he wrote in the introduction to the *MH*, “Though I am aware that in a number of instances the words of the *MH* are difficult for the

This article is dedicated to the memory of my uncle, Elyakim Getzel Zylberlicht z”l, Radzyner *hasid*, who planted in me the seed of Ishbitz-Radzyn, and to my wife, *she-tibbadel le-hayyim arukkim*, Batya, for nurturing it.

¹ Morris Faienstein, *All Is in the Hands of Heaven: The Teachings of Rabbi Mordecai Joseph Leiner of Izbica* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1989), 7-8.

² Joseph Weiss, “A Late Jewish Utopia of Religious Freedom,” in David Goldstein, ed., *Studies in Eastern European Jewish Mysticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 210. Alan Brill questions this. See Alan Brill, *Thinking God: The Mysticism of Rabbi Zadok of Lublin* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2002), 147 n. 34.

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untrained ear to bear, I have only gathered his teachings for the sake of our intimates who understand their true value.”³

Despite the renewed intense interest in R. Mordechai Yosef, I contend that he is still largely misunderstood. In a previous paper published in *Tradition*,⁴ I indicated the need to clarify his thought on the subject of his well-known doctrine ‘All is in the hands of Heaven.’ I hope now to contribute to this effort.

The first attempt to present a comprehensive picture of R. Mordechai Yosef’s thought was made by Morris Faienstein in his book, *All is in the Hands of Heaven*.⁵ As the title indicates, Faienstein sees the deterministic doctrine of the *MH* as resting at the foundation of his world view. The *MH* also believes, contrary to the traditional belief identifying the will of God with the Halakhah, that there is actually a dissonance between the two.⁶ This novel doctrine contains within it the seeds of anti-nomianism. Both of these positions are derived from the same point: belief in the infinite and manifest nature of the Divine will. The denial of free will and the undermining of the correlation between the will of God and the Halakhah does certainly create an almost unbearable tension with what is perceived as normative Judaism. Human free will and the absolute demand of obedience to the Law are the basic assumptions of many biblical texts and narratives. As we shall see, the *MH* does, however, balance these doctrines with cautionary and nuanced statements. Despite the equivocations that we find in the *MH*, scholars of Hasidism paint R. Mordechai Yosef as a radical non-traditional thinker. Shaul Magid contends that R. Mordechai Yosef maintains an “esoteric determinist position.”⁷ Joseph Weiss frames the doctrines of the *MH* in terms of religious anarchy based on personal illumination, as opposed to religion based upon obedience to the Law. He labels R. Mordechai Yosef

³ Rabbi Mordechai Yosef of Izbica, *Mei HaShiloah*, (Bnei Brak, Israel, 1995), all translations are my own, Introduction to Vol.1. All citations of the *MH* are volume I unless otherwise stated.

⁴ Herzl Hefter. “Idolatry: A Prohibition For Our Time,” *Tradition*, 42:1, (Spring 2009), n. 7.

⁵ See n. 1 above.

⁶ Faienstein. 22-28

⁷ Shaul Magid. *Hasidism on the Margin*, (Madison, Wi.: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003). On p. 120, Magid writes, “In our examination of Izbica/Radzin Hasidism, which comes as close to the explicit denial of free will that we have in Judaism (even as it argues for the temporal need to retain it), we must maintain a healthy skepticism about the positive affirmations of free will in these texts and see how these affirmations may veil an esoteric determinist position.”

a radical individualist.⁸ The theology of the *MH* has been employed to justify and cast the “Jewish Renewal Movement” as an authentic expression of traditional Judaism.⁹

In this paper I wish to demonstrate that, despite his profound and novel worldview, R. Mordechai Yosef is entirely loyal to traditional Jewish religious sensibilities. The theology of the *MH* infuses meaning into our mundane observance of the Torah and can actually serve as a basis for deepened commitment to Torah and consciousness of God in our religious experience.

In order to grasp the *MH* properly we must understand that his doctrines rest upon two pillars, one theological and the other phenomenological. Theologically, the determinism of R. Mordechai Yosef is predicated upon the immanent and the infinite nature of God’s will. The classic kabalistic reading of Deuteronomy 4:35, “there is none other than God,”¹⁰ is pointedly applied by the *MH* to the will of God. That is to say the only *will* that actually exists is the will of God. In addition to the theological principles upon which the *MH* is based, I contend that one cannot comprehend R. Mordechai Yosef without attempting to enter his heart. Phenomenologically, R. Mordechai Yosef surrenders free will in the presence of what Rudolf Otto termed the *mysterium tremendum*.¹¹ Surprisingly, perhaps, Otto can serve as our guide to R. Mordechai Yosef’s heart. In this paper, we shall show that the *MH* himself not only attributes ontological significance to refined religious phenomenology, but views phenomenology as the most reliable path to the metaphysics of theology.

⁸ Weiss, 212.

⁹ Magid, 253: “It is therefore no surprise that contemporary Jewish Renewal, a movement that, in effect, combines liberal religious critique, neo-Sabbatean religious reform, and Hasidic pietism, views itself as the spiritual inheritor of these Hasidic texts. While one can certainly argue whether and to what extent these reformers are accurately reading and interpreting these texts, it is certainly the case that these texts at least lend themselves to be read in such an expansive fashion.”

See, as well, the untitled review of Ora Wiskind-Elper’s book, *Wisdom of the Heart* in *Tikkun* magazine online, accessible at <http://www.tikkun.org/article.php/may2010recommends>. “The Teachings of Rabbi Ya’akov Leiner of Izvica-Radzyn (known to some as the Beit Ya’akov) and his father R. Mordecai Joseph Leiner (known as the Mei Hashiloach) have been among the most influential sources of the variant of the Jewish Renewal movement that we call neo-Hasidism and which – transmitted to us from the teachings of Abraham Joshua Heschel, Shlomo Carlebach, Zalman Schachter Shalomi, and from our own study of the Mei Hashiloach and Beit Ya’akov in Hebrew – permeates the worldview of *Tikkun* magazine.”

¹⁰ See, for example, *Sha’ar ha-Yibud ve-haEmunah*, ch. 3.

¹¹ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* London, Oxford University Press, 1980, trans. John W. Harvey.

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Through our exploration of both the theological and phenomenological underpinnings of R. Mordechai Yosef's thought, I hope that this paper will render a fuller and more faithful representation of this profound thinker. It will become clear that R. Mordechai Yosef's equivocal statements recognizing the reality of free will are an integral element of his theology.

We will begin by presenting the sections of the *MH* where the deterministic doctrine is most clearly expressed.

I. "All is in the Hands of Heaven"

What follows is the statement which is most responsible for garnering the *MH* its reputation of radicalism:

That which is stated in the Talmud 'all is in the hands of Heaven except for the fear of Heaven' (BT *Berachot* 33b) is only from the perspective of the limit of human understanding. In truth, all is in the hands of Heaven including the fear of Heaven and it is only that in this world God conceals His ways.¹²

In this piece from *parashat Vayera*, the *MH* presents us with a two tiered reality: one from the human perspective which experiences autonomy and free will and the other from the Divine perspective in which "all is in the hands of Heaven."

R. Mordechai Yosef conceives the sin of Korah in this context and goes on to explain the nature and purpose of this metaphysic.

And Korah Took. [...] In truth, however, it is the will of God that this world should be a world of appearances... On a more profound level all is in the hands of Heaven and [the perception of] human freedom of choice is likened merely to the thin membrane covering garlic (*kelipat ha-shum*), and is only according to his understanding. This is because God has concealed His ways from human beings because He desires human worship and if this [Divine reality] was revealed no service of God would be possible.¹³

This two-tiered reality was created by God when He drew a veil over our eyes, creating a "Matrix"-like psychological illusion in order to facilitate Divine worship. Korah contends that, since his "fear of Heaven" is perfect,

¹² *MH Vayerah s.v. vatechabesh*, 27.

¹³ *MH Korah*, 154.

he has escaped the matrix and transcended the need for *avodat Ha-Shem*. Being of perfect *yirat shamayim*, Korah pretends to a level of “God-consciousness” in which he experiences his own desires and actions as being those of God.

The following metaphysic emerges: God’s infinite will is the only true will, and it manifests itself in all creation and particularly in the human heart. As a consequence, “All is in the hands of Heaven, even fear of Heaven.” Mass consciousness of this reality would be spiritually debilitating, since it would leave no room for human service of God. (We will relate to the *MH*’s view of the crucial role played by divine worship later in this paper.) Therefore God has veiled this reality creating an illusionary world in which we experience autonomous free will. This is the world of ‘*kelipat ha-shum*’, the skin of the garlic.¹⁴

II. Antinomianism

Believing in the infinite presence of the Divine will in this world carries with it potentially “hazardous” conclusions. According to the *MH* in the section quoted above, Korah’s antinomian attack on the halakhic hierarchy was a consequence of his utopian theology. The utopian reality is fleshed out further in the following passage from *parashat Shemini*:

God is present in all actions that were performed from the moment of creation until the end of time. Without His will nothing could possibly be done... The closer one gets to God the more he merits the revelation of God’s light without garments, which are the fences and the restraints [of the Torah]. This is because in the clear light no restraint or prohibition is found and all human actions are clearly for [the sake of] God.¹⁵

The infinite Divine will is by necessity beyond human comprehension and cannot possibly be contained within any legal system.¹⁶

If you walk in the path of my statutes: “If” indicates uncertainty. That is to say that even one who walks in the path of the Torah must also be in a state of uncertainty, since perhaps he is not fulfilling the will of God completely. The will of God is exceedingly profound.¹⁷

¹⁴ *MH Vayelekh* s.v. *mi-kets*, 198.

¹⁵ *MH Shemini* s.v. *va-yehi*, 105.

¹⁶ *MH Emor* s.v. *va-haveitem*, 126; *Hukkat* s.v. *va-Yis’u*, 159, *Ki Tetse*, s.v. *Ki*, 189.

¹⁷ *MH Behukkotai* p. 135.

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The dissonance between Divine will and the Law is crucial to the eschatology of R. Mordechai Yosef.¹⁸ This is reflected in his interpretation of Rav's statement in BT *Shabbat* 138b that "In the future the Torah is destined to be forgotten".¹⁹

Israel will divine God's will only from the depths of their hearts [and not through the Torah and its commandments]... and as a consequence of their authentic cleaving (*devekut*), their hearts will not deviate from the will of God... for the Torah, the Holy One and Israel are one.²⁰

There exists a level of refined human consciousness of God which transcends the reality of halakhic prohibitions. In this higher reality it is clear that all human actions are ultimately in accordance with the will of God.²¹

All human actions are not only in accordance with the Divine will but are actually an intrinsic part of God's plan for creation. This consciousness will become manifest upon the culmination of the process of refinement and edification (*berur*) at the end of days.²² In exceptional circumstances, though, an individual may lay claim to this heightened God consciousness prior to the actual End of Days.

Nowhere is the doctrine of R. Mordechai Yosef more radically employed than in the "infamous" interpretation of the narrative of Zimri and Phineas.²³

The conventional reading of the biblical narrative casts Zimri as the licentious villain and Phineas as the zealous hero who preserves the relationship between God and His people in a time of crisis. R. Mordechai Yosef turns this reading on its head. Unwilling to assume that the Torah is merely telling a tale of a sinner surrendering to his base desires, R. Mordechai Yosef casts Phineas, Zimri, and Zimri's desire in a different light. Zimri understands his insurmountable desire for Kosbi as a revelation of God's will. Zimri, in his own eyes, is an actor in a cosmic drama that transcends space and time (as well as Halakhah). His act of union with Kosbi is somehow connected to the redemption of Dina the daughter of Jacob.²⁴ Zimri puts forth, so to speak, a twofold argument. First, uncontrollable desire experienced by an individual who has refined himself

¹⁸ Magid, 226.

¹⁹ Faierstein, 27.

²⁰ *MH Likkutei Shas, Shabbat* 138b, 243.

²¹ *MH Vayera* s.v. *va-tekhahesh*, 27.

²² *MH Bereshit* s.v. *va-yetsav*, 15.

²³ *MH Pinhas* s.v. *va-yar*, 164. See Magid, 190-198 and Faierstein, 33-34.

²⁴ See *MH Balak* s.v. *vehinei*, 164.

through extreme ascetic practices is a revelation of God's will in the human heart. Second, he (Zimri) is such an individual. Significantly, Phineas only rejects the second assumption while accepting the first. He believes that Zimri could have done more to suppress his desire. Since Phineas's strike against Zimri is '*le-shem Shamayim*' – for the sake of Heaven – God forgives him. Phineas is cast by R. Mordechai Yosef as something of a fool, acting immaturely in this instance.

We find here the emergence of two conflicting tendencies; the authentic and passionate Zimri, who experiences divine revelation in the desires of his heart, and the cautious Phineas who misunderstands him and upholds normative behavior in the context of an organized socio-religious structure.

In fact, according to the R. Mordechai Yosef, these two opposing models have their antecedent in the typologies of Yosef and Yehuda. Yosef, "the *tsaddik*," the saint, is so characterized because he did not succumb to his desire with regard to the wife of Potiphar. As a consequence of this defining moment, he comes to symbolize adherence to the principles of the law, come what may.

The unique quality (lit. the source of life) which God invested in the tribe of Ephraim is the ability to determine, without fail, the correct legal ruling and Halakhah in every contingency they face and not to deviate from it.²⁵

In contradistinction, Yehuda is the "*ba'al teshuva*," the penitent, who through self-effacement (in his episode with Tamar and his readiness for self-sacrifice in order to protect Benjamin) attains a level of God-consciousness which enables him to intuit the unique will of God in particular instances without relying upon general halakhic principles.²⁶

The unique quality of Yehuda, however, is to look directly towards God in every instance. Even though he may know which way the law tends to lean, nonetheless he turns to God to instruct him regarding the hidden truth in this particular situation... He does not want to rely upon himself [i.e. his interpretation of the law]; rather, he seeks God's renewed enlightenment to comprehend His will. At times this approach may necessitate taking action contrary to the Halakhah, since it is a "time to act for the Lord" etc.²⁷

²⁵ *MH Vayeshev* s.v. *ve-tse*, 47.

²⁶ See *MH Vayehi* s.v. *va-yomer*, 59, concerning Ya'akov's relation to Avraham and Yitshak.

²⁷ *MH Vayeshev*, op. cit.

Beyond a doubt, from the Orthodox perspective, we have here a potentially dangerous doctrine of radical Divine immanence which at times justifies antinomian behavior.²⁸

III. Equivocations

Given the thought out and cohesive doctrine with such radical potential, it is noteworthy that neither R. Mordechai Yosef himself nor his descendants, the later *admorim* of Izbica and Radzin, nor their Hasidim, demonstrated any hint of antinomian behavior.²⁹ In fact, there are a number of instances where R. Mordechai Yosef equivocates regarding the doctrine ‘all is in the hands of Heaven,’ *ha-kol bi-yedei Shamayim*.³⁰ It is to these statements we must now turn our attention in order to acquire a more balanced picture of his thought.

R. Mordechai Yosef was acutely aware of the hazards of his approach. Let us consider the following commentary from *parashat Tetsavve*:

And you shall construct an altar for the offering of incense. Behold all the vessels [of the tabernacle] were mentioned in *parashat Teruma* except for the golden altar [of the incense]. The reason for this, as it states in the Zohar, is that the *ketoret* (incense) is that which binds together all realities (*ketira de-kula*). [The *ketoret*] points to the fact that all occurrences, even in this world, are bound to the will of God, and without that will nothing would occur. Now, this conception may lead one to moral laxity (*kallut rosh*). This is why the altar was not mentioned in *parashat Teruma*, appearing only after the priestly vestments were mentioned in *parashat Tetsavve*. The vestments promote great fear of Heaven and guarding oneself from the seductions and desires of this world... The priest, through his vestments, imbued the hearts of Israel with great fear and awe. [Only] after the priest instilled awe in the hearts of Israel would they find the capacity to absorb the joy and love that is derived from the *ketoret*.

²⁸ Of course, the danger inherent in any doctrine cannot necessarily either confirm or disprove that doctrine. Magid, 203 and 247 believes, that the *MH* professes “soft antinomianism whereby law is undermined yet protected.”

²⁹ See Allan Nadler, “Hasidism on the Margin: Reconciliation, Antinomianism, and Messianism in Izbica/Radzin Hasidism (review),” *JQR* 96:2 (Spring 2006), 276-282. The following anecdote told in Hasidic circles is particularly relevant. One morning, the story goes, when R. Mordechai Yosef arose from his bed, he inadvertently tied his right shoe before his left (in violation of the ruling of the *Shulhan Arukh, Orach Hayyim* 2:4). So shaken was R. Mordechai Yosef that he fasted that day in penance. See R. Yeruham Leiner, *Maamar Zikkaron la-Rishonim*, (Jerusalem, 1997), 8.

³⁰ See, e.g., *Berakhot* 33b.

Burning the incense produces a cloud in the sanctuary. The Zohar as quoted by R. Mordechai Yosef says that clouds “bind.” In what sense do clouds bind and what is the meaning of this imagery for the *MH*? Let us begin with the fundamentals; clouds are perceived as dwelling between heaven and earth. Their unique position and texture cause them to obscure the boundary between the two. For the *MH*, heaven and earth symbolize the incongruous epistemic realities of the Divine and human perspectives, respectively. The divine perspective, Heaven, proclaims, ‘all is in the hands of Heaven *including* the fear of Heaven whereas the human perspective, earth, asserts ‘all is in the hands of Heaven *excluding* the fear of Heaven.’ Though the perspective of ‘*including* the fear of Heaven’ is that of God, while we humans experience our will and ourselves as distinct from God, we can at times touch the Divine transcendent reality. The cloud of the *ketoret* obscures the boundary between Heaven and earth,³¹ “and, as such, symbolizes a window, so to speak, into the Divine reality of all is in the hands of Heaven including the fear of Heaven.” Consciousness that all will in the world is none other than the Divine will comes with potentially hazardous consequences. What is to become of human responsibility and culpability for criminal acts? The *MH* on *parashat Beshallah* echoes this concern.

Amalek attributes all its actions to God, saying that all the evil which it performs is the will of God since without the will (consent) of God it would be powerless to do anything. The proper response [to Amalek] is to insist that the fear of Heaven is in the hands of man and that man requires service and prayer.³²

R. Mordechai Yosef expresses his concern through the words he puts in the mouth of Amalek. Since all is in the hands of Heaven, how can we be held responsible for our dreadful deeds?³³ Amalek’s claim is all the more

³¹ It is informative to compare the symbolic significance of clouds in the Zohar and the symbols of other civilizations. See Heinrich Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, ed. Joseph Campbell, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1946), 106.

³² *MH Beshallah s.v. Hasbem*, 75.

³³ It is noteworthy that Eric Fromm’s psychological analysis of Nazism and the authoritarian personality is strikingly similar to R. Mordechai Yosef’s reading of Amalek. (Erich Fromm, *Escape From Freedom*, (New York: Rinehart, 1941), 168-9:

“Not only the forces that determine one’s own life directly but also those that seem to determine life in general are felt as unchangeable fate. It is fate that there are wars and that one part of mankind has to be ruled by another. It is fate that the amount of suffering can never be less than it always has been. Fate may be rationalized

disturbing since it is essentially true. There is no rational answer according to the *MH*. There is however, an existential response which preempts the claim. Only after being transformed through tireless religious work, symbolized by the priestly vestments, can one authentically comprehend that all is in the hands of Heaven without falling prey to moral corruption, what R. Mordechai Yosef refers to as *kallut rosh*. Proper fear of Heaven is the necessary prerequisite for the heightened God-consciousness available through the window of the *ketoret*.

At this point we are left with the difficult task of assimilating these equivocal statements made by the *MH* into his comprehensive world view. We have two alternatives. The first possibility is to claim that the equivocal statements cannot and should not be brought into sync with the doctrine of ‘All is in the hands of Heaven.’ R. Mordechai Yosef’s “retreat” from his radical position in that case is not fundamental in nature; rather, it emerges from public policy considerations. The mass awareness of ‘All is in the hands of Heaven’ would be detrimental to the stability of the community, which requires normative behavior by its members. Furthermore, perhaps the *MH* was simply too “*frum*,” that is to say, in the end he was emotionally unwilling to countenance in practice the far-reaching ramifications of his doctrines.³⁴

This alternative misses entirely the crucial role which the observance of commandments and fear of Heaven play in the process of enlightenment. In order to gain a broader perspective of his doctrine, a position which would be capable of absorbing the equivocations he expressed, it is essential to understand R. Mordechai Yosef’s subjective religious experience, his phenomenology. We must ask ourselves what led R. Mordechai Yosef to this deterministic doctrine which seems so at odds with mainstream Jewish tradition.

IV. Divine Immanence and Free Will

It is noteworthy that nowhere does R. Mordechai Yosef relate to the famed dispute among the medieval authorities regarding the question of God’s omniscience and free will. In fact, R. Mordechai Yosef arrives at his

philosophically as “natural law” or as “destiny of man,” *religiously as the “will of the Lord,”* (emphasis mine - HH) ethically as “duty” – for the authoritarian character can do nothing but submit. The authoritarian character worships the past. What has been, will eternally be. To wish or to work for something that has not yet been before is crime or madness. The miracle of creation – and creation is always a miracle – is outside the range of his emotional experience.”

³⁴ See Magid, 251.

doctrine not through philosophical speculation but as a consequence of religious piety.³⁵

Korah's claim to the level of consciousness of "All in the hands of Heaven" is built upon a pretension to the highest level of fear of Heaven (*yirat Shamayim*). According to R. Mordechai Yosef, the key to comprehending the world as it is, namely the reality of "*ha-kol bidei Shamayim*," is fear of Heaven, *yirat Shamayim*.

The consciousness of 'All is in the hands of Heaven even the fear of Heaven' is rooted in the phenomenology of the fear of Heaven. We will now turn to Rudolf Otto to flesh out this phenomenology. Fear of Heaven is derived from what Otto termed "creature consciousness" in the presence of the "*mysterium tremendum*." This is the human response in the face of divine revelation. Otto makes a distinction between two stages regarding the relationship between free will and the overpowering presence of God which can serve to elucidate the *MH*. Otto terms the first stage predestination and the second determinism. "Predestination," he states,

is nothing but the 'creature consciousness,' that self-abasement and the annulment of personal strength and claims and achievements in the presence of the transcendent as such. The numen, overpoweringly experienced, becomes the all-in-all. The creature, with his being and doing, his willing and 'running,' his schemes and resolves, becomes nothing. The conceptual expression to indicate such a felt submergence and annihilation over and against the numen is then: here impotence and there omnipotence; here the futility of one's own choice, there the will which ordains all and determines all... In the face of the eternal power man is reduced to naught, *together with* his free choice and action. And the eternal power waxes immeasurable just because it fulfills its decrees *despite* the freedom of human will.³⁶

According to Otto, at this stage the creature response to the terror and immanence of the Divine Presence is one of helplessness but not loss of free

³⁵ See Brill, 161-162.

³⁶ Otto, 89, n. 1. The following well-known tale, quoted by Otto, illustrates the divine will persevering over human will. "Once when Azrael, the angel of death, came before Solomon he directed his gaze upon one of the king's companions. 'Who is that?' asked the man. 'The angel of death,' replied Solomon. 'He seems to be looking at me,' continued the other, 'so command the wind that it bear me hence and set me down in India.' Solomon did so. Then said the angel, 'I gazed upon him for so long out of astonishment seeing it had been commanded me to fetch his soul out of India, while he was yet with thee in Canaan.'"

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will. Rather it is the consciousness that God's will shall persevere *over* human will. R. Mordechai Yosef expresses this same notion in *parashat Behar*.

Since 'the word of the Lord will persevere forever' and it will not change, Heaven forbid, as a consequence of human action...

Human will remains autonomous, albeit helpless and overwhelmed. God does not enter the "four cubits" of the human mind, so to speak. Otto goes on to describe what he means by 'determinism.'

The thought of the deity as the absolutely sole and all-embracing active cause first occurs where the creature-feeling is intensified still further and is combined with theoretic considerations. It then leads to mysticism; and it is only again a further consequence if the speculations about being, peculiar to and characteristic of mysticism, become then attached to the thought of God as sole cause. To the creature then is denied, not merely *efficacy* as a cause, but true *reality* and complete being, and all existence and fullness of being is ascribed to the absolute reality, who alone really *is*, while all 'being' of creatures is either a function of this absolute Being – which brings them into existence – or mere illusion.³⁷

This approach calling into question the "being" of all creatures is closer to the general understanding of the *MH* as expressed in his analysis of the birth of Yitshak, where God actually enters Sarah's mind. [See *MH Vayera* s.v. *Vatekhabesh* p. 27.] There is a very significant distinction, though, between both the approaches as outlined by Otto and the *MH*, respectively. According to Otto, the religious consciousness of both predestination and determinism is rooted in the "'creature consciousness,' that self-abasement and the annulment of personal strength and claims of achievement in the presence of the transcendent."³⁸ R. Mordechai Yosef accepts that the consciousness of 'All is in the hands of Heaven' is rooted in fear of Heaven, but the phenomenological journey does not end in morbid fear and terror; that fear gives rise to other sentiments which are more redemptive in nature. Let us consider the following two pieces:

Yehudah is as the butler [the *sar ha-mashkim* in Bereishit 40] because King David is referred to as the court jester [*bedabna de-malka*]... and in truth God instilled in Yehuda such powerful desire and passion to the extent that he was unable to resist. As in the case with Tamar and all similar instances

³⁷ Ibid., 90.

³⁸ Ibid., 88-89.

connected to the tribe of Yehuda, as our sages say, that the angel responsible for desire coerced him. For this reason he is not held responsible for his failure to resist temptation. This is why he is referred to as the court jester – he surrenders himself to be defeated by God.³⁹

Here the surrender to the all-powerful and immanent will of God is associated with the hilarity of a court jester.

Let us revisit the last section of the *MH* from *parashat Tetsarve*, which we quoted above.

The priest, through his vestments, imbued the hearts of Israel with great fear and awe. [Only] after the priest instilled awe the hearts of Israel would they find the capacity to absorb the joy and love that is derived from the *ketoret*.

Surrender, laughter, foolishness, and, finally, profound joy and love.

In response to the *mysterium tremendum* there is a willing surrender of self in order to serve as an instrument of God's will. With this surrender comes a consciousness of God within and concomitant joy. Paradoxically, only through surrender of self to God can we receive our true selves back from God as instruments of God.⁴⁰

There is one more sentiment that we can glean from this process as described by the *MH*. As we have seen, the source of the revelation that 'All is in the hands of Heaven' is in Yitshak, the symbol of fear of Heaven. Yitshak's name is derived, of course, from the *tsehok* of Sarah and Avraham. *Tsehok* may be translated as laughter, but I believe that a more accurate and telling translation in this context would be 'wonder.' When one becomes conscious of one's limitations in general and of one's will in particular, and comprehends that all will is His will, there is of course a sense of lack of control. If that lack of control is accompanied by trust (as it should be)⁴¹ then we open ourselves up to the experience of wonder.

With the help of Rudolf Otto, we may describe the phenomenology of the heightened God-consciousness of the *MH* as follows; in the presence of the *mysterium tremendum* we become acutely aware of our own limitations and "creatureliness." This "creature feeling" intensifies and

³⁹ *MH Vayeshev* s.v. *va-yeshev*, 45.

⁴⁰ See *MH Vayetse* s.v. *ha-arets*, 40.

⁴¹ R. Mordechai Yosef believes that, alongside the existential uncertainty inherent in divine revelation there exists, paradoxically, a certain unshakable confidence and rootedness in God. R. Mordechai Yosef refers to this unshakable confidence as the "*mitvah oz*." See *MH Toladot* s.v. *va-ye'ehav*, 33-34. On misplaced confidence, see *Korah* s.v. *va-yikkah*, 154.

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generates the mystical awareness that God's will is in truth the only real will and perception of human autonomy seems to be an illusion. At this point the door is open to experience wonder in the presence of the unpredictable, all-encompassing Divine will. Upon surrender to the infinite will I ultimately come to joy and laughter, conscious of God in me.

Fear of Heaven is the sentiment that precipitates the heightened awareness of the existence of the Divine will as the only true will. The translation of this fear of Heaven according to the *MH* is *avoda*, or, simply speaking, adherence to God's commandments. R. Mordechai Yosef's call for restraint in the case of Korah, the priestly vestments, and Amalek is not an apology engendered by practical public policy considerations or "frum" intuitions but rather an essential aspect of his theology as a consequence of his phenomenology.

V. The Knowing Heart

R. Mordechai Yosef is making an epistemological point by saying that the comprehension of the Divine reality is not primarily an intellectual endeavor. The entire human being must be enlisted to the end of comprehending God. Similarly, the paradox of free will and preexisting harmony cannot be harnessed by the mind alone. R. Mordechai Yosef beckons us toward a "God-consciousness" born of fear of Heaven, whose seat is in the heart.

In *parashat va-Yakbel*, the *MH* notes that the greatness, spiritual authenticity, and integrity of Moshe are far from apparent to the people. Regarding the appointment of Bezalel to oversee the construction of the tabernacle, the *MH* states:

The people were maligning him [Moshe], saying that he appoints his relatives to the high positions just as the congregation of Korah claimed... And this is the reason Moshe said "*See (reu)* the Lord has called Bezalel by name"... for Moshe wanted to vindicate himself. By saying "see" Moshe was basically saying, if you look with a kind eye (*ayin tova*) [upon the workmanship of Bezalel] you shall see that the will of God is that Bezalel should be the mainstay of the tabernacle's construction. If you take a curtain produced by Bezalel and compare it to a curtain produced by others, you will see that the one produced by Bezalel possesses a charm and a beauty greater than all the others, even though the two curtains are identical in their workmanship. This certainly proves that God's will desires him more than anyone else. This is the meaning of the use of the term "see," "*reu*," in order to denote understanding (*havana*), i.e. that you should understand that Bezalel is God's chosen.

The comprehension of beauty is not rational in nature. There is no quantifiable difference between the two pieces of workmanship, yet one possesses beauty and the other does not. This inexplicable charm, “*hen*,” is a divine revelation. Since beauty is not “objective” it may be stubbornly denied by the intellect. In order to comprehend the revelation, R. Mordechai Yosef contends that we must cultivate a generous eye and a seeing heart. Reason, “*hokhma*,” can only take us so far; the comprehension of beauty and divine revelation depends upon the understanding heart, “*binat ha-lev*.”

R. Mordechai Yosef goes on to say that the predicament of Bezalel is also the situation in which Moshe finds himself.

This situation was true of Moshe as well. Even though the inner beauty of Moshe was not manifest on the surface, one who would look upon Moshe with a kind eye would comprehend his inner depths.

When Moshe beseeches the people to see the beauty of Bezalel’s work, he is indirectly appealing to the people on his own behalf, asking to be seen for who he is.

Finally, the *MH* arrives at, what I believe is, his ultimate point in this piece when he equates Moshe with God.

The meaning of the veil (*masveh*) is in numerical value equivalent to the name *YXVX* and the name *Elohekha*...

The veil of Moshe alludes to the fact that Moshe’s grandeur is not comprehended by the people. He possesses a thankless job, so to speak. Moshe lacks the personal charisma and compelling leadership style to woo the masses toward him. Burdensome responsibility accompanied by lack of appreciation is the fate of Moshe.

By equating the veil, *masveh*, of Moshe to the holy names of *YXVX* and *Elohekha*, R. Mordechai Yosef is saying that God too, has a thankless job. God is cast as a tragic figure, at times maligned, often misunderstood, and almost always unappreciated.

The solution to the mutually shared predicament by God and Moshe lies in the hearts of the people. The seemingly impenetrable veil which obscures the divine reality is in fact translucent rather than opaque. If we would only gaze upon creation with a kind eye and an open heart we would penetrate the divine reality.

We see from here that the cultivated kind eye and the refined religious phenomenology of the heart are not merely psychic events. They are, in fact, windows into the Divine reality. This is stated very clearly by the *MH* in *parashat Lekh lekha*.

And the Lord said to Avram, Get yourself out of your country... [*lekh lekha*] i.e. get yourself *to yourself* (emphasis is mine)... When Avraham witnessed the events of the generation of the dispersion, [the current events] were a source of great astonishment to him and his soul was stirred up [by the question] “Who created all of this?... God answered him, saying, just look inside yourself [for the answer]... From the very stirrings of your heart you may deduce that a Creator certainly exists... It is He who has awakened your heart and soul to this end.

For R. Mordechai Yosef, Avraham’s metaphysical theology is a derivative of his phenomenology. This is because “All is in the hands of Heaven including fear of Heaven.” The storm in Avraham’s heart is a Divine revelation of an ontological reality.

VI. The Nature of an Illusion

R. Mordechai Yosef’s doctrine of the infinite immanence of God’s will calls into question the being of all creatures. The *MH* speaks of two disparate realities: The reality in which we experience autonomous free will, namely, all is in the hands of Heaven *excluding* fear of Heaven; and the reality from the divine perspective in which all is in the hands of Heaven *including* the fear of Heaven.

Once again, Otto will help us formulate our dilemma. Otto, in the section quoted above, speaks of two possibilities in understanding being: either (1) the “being of all creatures is a function of the Absolute Being which brings them into existence”⁴² – or (2) [being is] “mere illusion.” In other words, is there any ontological reality to our autonomous being as we perceive it or is it merely a divinely orchestrated illusion? In the terms of the *MH*, what is the nature of this “skin of the garlic” (“*kelippat ha-shum*”)?

This elusive dilemma requires a two-pronged approach. First, I will present a close reading of a number of key pieces in the *MH*. Second, after we establish what R. Mordechai Yosef believes, we will propose a metaphysic to elucidate the meaning of a God-created illusion.

Reading the *MH* superficially, we would conclude that indeed the sense we have of our own free will is merely an illusion designed by God in order to facilitate worship of Him. This reading, though, leaves us in a quandary: what is the meaning of our *avoda* ultimately, if it is only a consequence of a sophisticated Divine ruse?

⁴² P. 90.

The *MH* in *parashat be-Shalah* (p. 75) presents both realities impartially, which would seem to indicate that both enjoy ontological reality. R. Mordechai Yosef juxtaposes the behavior of the children of Israel in the confrontations with Egypt and Amalek, respectively. At the shores of the Red Sea, facing the advancing forces of Egypt, the people are commanded to be silent: “God will fight for you and you shall remain silent.”⁴³ Shortly afterwards, however, when the Amalekites attack the Israelites in the desert, the outcome of the battle depends upon the potency of the prayer of the Israelites.

Egypt and Amalek, respectively, represent the two opposite sides of the paradox. Egypt attributes to itself mastery over its own fate by asserting “by my own strength has granted me this great victory.”⁴⁴ This attitude leaves no room for the divine will and providence. Amalek, on the other hand, echoes the seemingly pious voice that all is in the hands of Heaven including fear of Heaven, thereby absolving itself of any moral responsibility and culpability for its actions. It is clear from the *MH* that he believes that there is an element of truth to both claims. Their corruption lies not in the claims themselves but rather in the lack of acknowledgement of the paradox. Recognizing the paradox, Israel must respond appropriately to both of these corrupt interpretations of reality.

The following quote from *parashat Tazria* also indicates that R. Mordechai Yosef attributes ontological reality to the “appearance” of free will.

If you seek Him you shall find Him. Finding God certainly does not occur by chance. Rather, this was ordained to be from the beginnings of the seeker’s creation to merit this redemption. Nonetheless from the human perspective there is free will, as it is stated, “If you seek Him you will find Him.” This is a great wonder.⁴⁵

After putting the paradox on the table, so to speak, R. Mordechai Yosef describes it as a “great wonder.” If free will was merely an illusion lacking ontological reality, then in effect we lack an authentic paradox. There would be no wonder. By attributing wonder to the paradox, we see that R. Mordechai Yosef grants our phenomenal reality, the *kelippat ha-shum*, ontology.

⁴³ Exodus 14:14.

⁴⁴ Deuteronomy 8:17.

⁴⁵ *MH Tazria* s.v. *Isba*, 110.

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R. Mordechai Yosef fleshes this out further in his discussion of *shemita* and *yovel* in *parashat be-Har*. *Shemita* and *yovel* symbolize the two poles of the paradox. In the *shemita* reality, we perceive the world through the prism of *parashat Mishpatim* and *massechet Bava Metsia*. This is the world in which mine is mine and yours is yours, the world of private property and acquisitions. In contradistinction, the reality of *yovel* is one of *kodesh la-Shem*, sanctified to the Lord, reality from the Divine perspective in which all returns to the preexisting harmony. *Yovel* symbolizes the elevated consciousness of ‘what is Yours [i.e. God’s] is Yours and what is mine is also Yours.’ Stated in more general *MH* terminology, this is the reality of ‘All is in the hands of Heaven including the fear of Heaven.’

In the context of the “*shemita* reality” God commands us to relinquish that which is rightfully ours; refrain from the labors and deny ourselves the fruits of our own lands. Obedience and submission to the Divine will in this way are symbolic of all *avodat Hashem*, service of God. The function of this process is to edify and elevate human consciousness in order to comprehend the “*yovel* reality.”

And they will arrive at this consciousness and understanding [i.e. of the preexisting harmony] after they fulfill the laws of *shemita*, that is to say after they submit all that is theirs to God. As a consequence [of this submission] they will arrive at the consciousness of “that which is yours is yours” and they will be cognizant of where all things are rooted.

In his juxtaposition of the two conflicting realities, R. Mordechai Yosef reveals his attitude regarding the ontological significance of the “*shemita* reality,” that is, the reality of all is in the hands of Heaven excluding the fear of Heaven.

[In the Jubilee year] he will become conscious of the reality that that which is his by virtue of the inheritance of his fathers, the gift of God, shall remain his forever. However, that which he acquired through human efforts, though it was his property (*kinyano*) until now and it was in his possession (*be-reshuto*), nonetheless it is not his property in its root, he must return it to its proper place.

R. Mordechai Yosef describes reality from the human perspective as his property (*kinyano*) and in his possession (*be-reshuto*) yet not his (*eino shelo*). Listening to his formulation one cannot fail to hear the echo of BT *Bava Kamma* 70a.

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thought in the mind of God *is* reality.⁴⁶ I am suggesting here that, technically speaking, God *cannot* create an illusion. The impression of free will, experienced from the human perspective created by God, in fact makes free will a reality.⁴⁷

We come now to a paradoxical two tiered reality. Whether ‘All is in the hands of Heaven *including* or *excluding* the fear of Heaven’ depends upon the perspective. From God’s perspective, so to speak, ‘All is in the hands of Heaven including the fear of Heaven’. From the divinely created human perspective freedom exists. How do we straddle the apparent contradictory nature of creation; on the one hand, a world populated by autonomous human subjects possessing free will, and on the other hand an eternally perfect world as an expression of the infinite and omnipotent will of God? Creation assumes a significant Other.⁴⁸ Infinite Divine will, on the other

⁴⁶ See R. Ya’akov Leiner (the son of R. Mordechai Yosef): “The command of God is not as the command of flesh and blood. When one commands another, nothing yet exists. When God commanded Moshe, however, saying ‘do such and such,’ Moshe [actually] saw that all was already performed.” R. Ya’akov Leiner, *Beit Ya’akov*, (New York, 1981), *parashat Pekudei*, 501. In this case the cognitive state of God, so to speak, is the substance of being. Similarly, one could say that a divine dream is unlike the dream of flesh and blood in that the human dream does not exist outside the psyche whereas the divine dream is the substance of being.

I find it fascinating that, in grappling with nature of being, Hindu civilization employs very similar imagery. Heinrich Zimmer (38-39) tells the story of an ancient holy man, Markandeya, who wanders the phenomenal world which is in fact the interior of Vishnu’s sleeping body. It is the dream of Vishnu which constructs our “real” world. “While the saint has been wandering about the interior of the cosmic giant he had perceived a reality which had seemed to him congenial to his nature, and he had regarded it as solid and substantial. Nevertheless it had been only a dream or a vision within the mind of the sleeping god.”

⁴⁷ It should be noted that not all “realities” enjoy the same level of ontology. The reality from God’s perspective must be more *real* than the reality of the human perspective, the *kelippat ha-shum*, in order that talk of human consciousness of a higher Divine reality should be meaningful. The idea of multiple levels of reality is expressed by the following *Beit Ya’akov* in *Bereshit* 44 (p. 28): “The Zohar (*Bereshit* 24b) states that the worlds are as the layers of an onion. This means that every world is a garment of the world above it and this world is a garment of the higher world and so *ad infinitum*.”

⁴⁸ Creation is essentially the beginning of the dichotomy between the subject and the object. This is expressed most clearly in the following quote by R. Tsadok ha-Kohen [*Likkutei Maamarim* (Jerusalem, 2002), 46, s.v. *u-leKakh*]: “The reason why the letter ‘bet’ which begins the word *bereshit* is enlarged [in the Torah scroll] is because the creation of the world was with the letter ‘bet.’ [The letter] *alef* designates the primordial unity; the singularity and uniqueness [of God] as it was before the world was created. Creation initiated the appearance as if there is a Creator and creation.” [Hence the letter ‘bet’ which indicates duality]. R. Zadok ha-Kohen of Lublin, See also R. Tsadok ha-Kohen, *Komets ha-Minba*, Part 2 (Jerusalem, 2002), 22.

hand, assumes a preexisting eternal order in which all elements fit into a harmonious perfection and there is no “space” for a significant Other. Free will, of course, heralds a significant Other but is at odds with the pietistic religious experience of the overpowering intimate Divine presence.

The *MH* embraces a metaphysic which stubbornly clings to both poles of the paradox of creation. R. Mordechai Yosef insists upon the integrity of individual identity in the face of the infinite divine will.

What profit has the worker from all his toil? (Ecclesiastes 3:9)... Since all the [spiritual] labors that man labors for God are completely derived from the will of God that nurtured him, they are not attributed to him. This being the case, “what profit has the worker?” To this [question] the verse responds, “all his toil.” That is to say that his profit is in the fact that he toils and desires on his part to fulfill the will of God – this will remain his forever and as a consequence God consents that all his actions should be attributed to the person who performed them.⁴⁹

Personal identity is thus maintained (one could say, against all odds) even within the context of the preexisting harmony. This is stated very clearly in the *MH*'s explanation in *parashat be-Har* of the purpose and efficacy of *avoda*.

Perhaps a person will reflect in his heart saying that if it is so that only that which God has apportioned to him will ultimately remain his, then all his efforts to accumulate wealth and expand his boundaries are in vein. In response to this King Solomon stated, (Ecclesiastes 10:1) “a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.” This means that it is true that the knowledge that nothing will remain of all human effort, will lead to passivity in this world. Yet it is the small amount of folly that is found in people that causes them to exert effort and acquire property even though they understand intellectually that this is only temporary. Nonetheless there is a profit which the person merits through their efforts. That is, that when the time comes for one to return to one's own birthright and return everything to its proper

This idea is echoed by R. Ya'akov Leiner (*Beit Ya'akov*, Jerusalem, 1998 *parashat Bereshit* 6, p.7.) as well: “Creation is merely a veil creating an appearance of a world distinct from God. The Blessed One established a shield and a barrier concealing His light in this world... in order that people should experience themselves as separate and autonomous creations.” For more on the subject-object dichotomy, see *Beit Ya'akov* cited above in the n. 47.

⁴⁹ *MH* Vol. 2, *Kobelet*, s.v. *ma yitron ha-oseh*, 135.

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location, the person will profit in that when he returns the portion of his comrade he will only return up to [but not including] the boundary. The boundary itself, which God apportioned in order to distinguish between the portion of one person and that of another, that boundary will be added to the portion of he who originally extended his reach into the portion of his comrade and toiled in this world. Some slight *protection* (emphasis mine) will remain for him from the portion of his comrade even though he returned the portion itself. This is the significance of all human effort in this world. This consciousness will remain with him for eternity.

The significance of *avoda* is that it precipitates the awareness of the collective harmony from the divine perspective while simultaneously providing the grounding for individual identity. Our ambitious overachiever, having overstepped his bounds, must withdraw behind his previous boundaries come the jubilee year. The painful experience of relinquishing that which was earned with great effort has emblazoned itself upon his heart, making him acutely aware of himself and his true position in God's creation. Thus the individual is not absorbed into the whole in a manner which obliterates personal identity. Personal identity is maintained by engaging in *avoda*, the process through which the spiritual growth and accomplishments are attributed to the individual. The being of the individual is "protected" by the God-created veil, the *kelippat ha-shum*, which grants ontology to the human experience. I am a figment of God's imagination therefore I am.⁵⁰

VII. Summary and Concluding Thoughts

In this paper I have attempted to arrive at a balanced and more complete picture of the thought of R. Mordechai Yosef of Izbica. After presenting sections in the *MH* which express the doctrine of "All is in the hands of Heaven including the fear of Heaven," I have called attention to the *MH*'s hesitations and equivocal statements. It should go without saying that the first step in constructing a comprehensive view of the *MH*'s thought is to address all the relevant sources, not restricting ourselves to those which lend themselves to convenient interpretations and theological "headlines." Secondly, we cannot ignore the *MH*'s spiritual context and religious phenomenology when we attempt to understand his theology. I do not mean

⁵⁰ See *MH Bamidbar* s.v. *Vayedaber*, 139. Being "recognized" by God is what grants being to the individual as part of the harmonious whole.

to say here that we need to understand the *MH*'s historical context in order to understand him fully, even though this may in fact be true. Rather I am asserting that it is fundamental to the *thought* of R. Mordechai Yosef that phenomenology is the key to theology. In the *weltanschauung* of the *MH*, the fear of Heaven as embodied in halakhic observance is a *condicio sine qua non* for the attainment of any form of spiritual perfection and consciousness of the Divine. This is because authentic enlightenment can only be achieved through the refined intuition of the heart. According to the *MH*, those who deny the indispensability of *avodat Hashem* find themselves in the honored company of Amalek (in the worst case scenario), Korah, and the *Mekoshesh etsim*⁵¹ (at best).

We have demonstrated that the veil (*kelippat ha-shum*) which God created in order to grant an impression of human autonomy does in fact enjoy ontological reality. That is to say that from the God-created human perspective, we do possess free will and we are responsible for our actions.

A worldview that requires refined religious phenomenology in order to assert theological truths, affirms the presence of God in the human heart.⁵² It is the function of *avodat ha-Shem*, spiritual service, in the form of Torah, prayer, and the fulfillment of the Divine commandments, to make that presence manifest. The immediacy of the Divine in the human heart feeds a sense of urgency to facilitate its revelation. When we surrender our autonomous will before God, we open ourselves up to joy and wonder. God returns the favor, so to speak, by returning to us a self of heightened consciousness of ourselves rooted in, and expressing, the Divine.⁵³

⁵¹ *MH Shelah* s.v. *ve-asu*, 152.

⁵² See *Beit Ya'akov, Mishpatim* no. 4: "The fundamental source of vitality of all creation is unknown as it states (*Hagiga* 13b) 'Blessed be the glory of God from His place.' This indicates that His actual "place" is unknown. It is so stated in the *Zohar* (*Vayera* 103a) as well. This means that man is not conscious of the root of vitality which is embedded in the human heart, its [true] nature and desire. If one would be conscious of this, one would know the Holy One, Blessed be He."

⁵³ "To one who trusts God and attributes all one's actions to God, God compensates measure for measure and attributes even the intent which accompanies the actions to him." *MH Likkutim me-hamesh megillot, Rut* s.v. *yeshallem*, 205.

