

The Art of Writing the Oral Tradition

How Rabbi Judah the Prince Read the Decalogue

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An exoteric book contains then two teachings: a popular teaching of an edifying character, which is in the foreground; and a philosophic teaching concerning the most important subject, which is indicated only between the lines.

— Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*

... the text can be shown to be a genuine artifact. This testifies to and presupposes a thorough literary training on the side of the writers or editors; so the least we can do to make for a competent response as interpreters is to analyze and describe their work on all levels.

— Jan P. Fokkelman

Do not look at the bottle but at what is in it. You can have a new bottle full of old wine.

— Rabbi Judah the Prince, *Mishnah Avot 4*

Introduction: Two Readings for Two Audiences

In Before Chapter and Verse I showed that the Torah was composed to be read in two different ways. It can be read linearly, verse after verse, as it has been read for more than two thousand years. It can also be read according to its literary structure, as a set of woven compositions in which every part takes its meaning from two intersecting lines of organization. The first reading is open to everyone. The second depends on seeing the structure, and so it has been open only to the few who could see it or who were shown it. In Leo Strauss's terms, the first is the exoteric reading and the second the esoteric.

A thesis of this kind invites an obvious objection. The Torah is the foundational document of Judaism and matters a great deal to Christianity and Islam. If it was composed as I describe, how is it possible that no one in all the centuries of its reading has noticed? My answer has two parts. The simple part is that esoteric knowledge is, by definition, kept from the many. Those who discovered it, or were taught it, may have felt obliged to keep it to themselves, and so we should not expect to find it described openly. The more complex part is that the esoteric reading was in fact known in antiquity, and that this can be demonstrated. The demonstration comes from the Mishnah.

The Mishnah is the Hebrew legal compendium composed at the beginning of the third century CE, on which the Talmud was built over the following three centuries. More than five hundred of its chapters were constructed according to the same woven paradigm that organizes the units of the Torah. That alone shows that the knowledge of how to read and compose woven text survived for many centuries after the Torah was written. It also raises a question about the author of the Mishnah, Rabbi Judah the Prince, known simply as "Rabbi." No other extended

example of woven text has been found from the long period between the Torah and the Mishnah. Rabbi was not working within a known literary genre. Why, then, did he build his book this way?

Rabbi answered the question himself, and he answered it in the way we should expect from an esoteric author: within the structure of his book. In the first chapter of tractate Avot he placed a short composition of ten sayings, arranged as five pairs, that was built to be read alongside the Decalogue, the Ten Words, read as five consecutive pairs. Avot is the best-loved of all rabbinic writings, and its sayings have been quoted, taught and preached for eighteen centuries. It is also, as we will see, a precise example of Strauss's distinction between a popular teaching in the foreground and a teaching concerning the most important subject that is indicated only between the lines.

This essay follows the argument in four steps.

Part One reads the Decalogue as Rabbi must have read it, as five consecutive pairs of Words written across two tablets. Read this way, the ten Words stop being a list of commandments and become a single composition with a clear plan.

Part Two reads the five Pairs in Avot. With the help of the Maharal of Prague, we will see that what looks like a collection of sayings is a composition by one hand, built so that the reader who follows it is taught, step by step, to read between the lines.

Part Three sets the two compositions side by side. Rabbi's Pairs answer the Decalogue's pairs level by level, in language, in form and in content. Read together, they show how Rabbi understood the Decalogue, and they show that he possessed the esoteric reading of the Torah that he describes as handed down from Moses.

Part Four follows the comparison to its end. At the top of the Decalogue, YHWH speaks in the first person: "I YHWH am your deity." At the top of Rabbi's composition, Hillel speaks in the first person: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" This is the point at which the structure stops being a matter of literary analysis and becomes a matter for the reader.

A word on terms. I refer to the ten parts of the Decalogue as "Words," following the Torah's own name for them, עשרת הדברים, the Ten Words. I use the divine names as the Torah uses them: YHWH where the text names YHWH, Elohim where it names Elohim, and "the deity" where a statement applies to the divine in general.

Part One: The Decalogue in Five Pairs

YHWH spoke to you out of the fire; you heard the sound of words but perceived no shape, nothing but a voice. He declared to you the covenant that He commanded you to observe, the Ten Words; and He inscribed them on two tablets of stone.

— Deuteronomy 4:12–13

Where Does Each Word Begin?

The Torah tells us that the Decalogue contains ten Words and that they were written on two tablets of stone. It does not tell us where one Word ends and the next begins. Two major traditions have filled the gap. The rabbinic division, preserved in the Mekhilta, an early rabbinic commentary on Exodus, and followed, for our purposes, by most Protestant churches, counts the two prohibitions of coveting as one Word. To reach ten, it treats “I am YHWH your deity” as the first Word and “You shall have no other deities beside Me” as the beginning of the second. The division of Augustine, followed by the Catholic Church, does the opposite. It counts the two prohibitions of coveting as two Words and joins “I am YHWH” and “You shall have no other deities” into one. The two systems agree on the remaining six Words.

What is rarely noticed is that the Masoretic Text, the text written in the Torah scrolls read in every synagogue, divides the Decalogue as Augustine did, by means of its paragraph breaks, and not as the rabbinic literature does. The scroll preserves a Jewish division that the Rabbis themselves did not follow in their writings. I will return to this curious fact at the end of the essay.

There is a simple reason to prefer the division of the scroll. The Torah begins two separate prohibitions with the same words, “You shall not covet.” The first has a single object, “your fellow man’s house.” The second has a list of objects: “your fellow man’s wife, or his male or female slave, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your fellow man’s.” Why would the text separate the house from the list that begins with the wife, unless it meant to create two Words? As strong as this argument is, there is a stronger one. When the ten Words are divided as the scroll divides them, they fall into five consecutive pairs, and each pair has a subject of its own.

Figure 1. The Ten Words in five consecutive pairs, divided as in the Torah scroll (Exodus 20). Hebrew, read from right to left: tablet A is on the right.

לוח ב	לוח א	זוג
לא תשא את שם יהוה אלהיך לשוא כי לא ינקה יהוה את אשר ישא את שמו לשוא	אנכי יהוה אלהיך אשר הוצאתיך מארץ מצרים מבית עבדים לא יהיה לך אלהים אחרים על פני לא תעשה לך פסל וכל תמונה אשר בשמים ממעל ואשר בארץ מתחת ואשר במים מתחת לארץ לא תשתחוה להם ולא תעבדם כי אנכי יהוה אלהיך אל קנא פקד עון אבת על בנים על שלשים ועל רבעים לשנאי ועשה חסד לאלפים לאהבי ולשמרי מצותי	1
כבד את אביך ואת אמך למען יארכון ימיך על האדמה אשר יהוה אלהיך נתן לך	זכור את יום השבת לקדשו ששת ימים תעבד ועשית כל מלאכתך ויום השביעי שבת ליהוה אלהיך לא תעשה כל מלאכה אתה ובנך ובתך עבדך ואמתך ובהמתך וגרך אשר בשעריך כי ששת ימים עשה יהוה את השמים ואת הארץ את הים ואת כל אשר בם וינח ביום השביעי על כן ברך יהוה את יום השבת ויקדשהו	2
לא תנאף	לא תרצח	3
לא תענה ברעך עד שקר	לא תגנב	4
לא תחמד אשת רעך ועבדו ואמתו ושורו וחמרו וכל אשר לרעך	לא תחמד בית רעך	5

Figure 2. The Ten Words in five consecutive pairs (English)

Pair	Tablet A	Tablet B
1	1A I YHWH am your deity who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage. You shall have no other deities beside Me. You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness, of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I YHWH your deity am an impassioned deity, visiting the guilt of the fathers upon the children, upon the third and fourth generations of those who reject Me, but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep My commandments.	1B You shall not swear falsely by the name of YHWH your deity; for YHWH will not clear one who swears falsely by His name.
2	2A Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of YHWH your deity: you shall not do any work—you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, or your cattle, or the stranger who is within your settlements. For in six days YHWH made heaven and earth and sea, and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day; therefore YHWH blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.	2B Honor your father and your mother, that you may long endure on the land that YHWH your deity is giving you.
3	3A You shall not murder.	3B You shall not commit adultery.
4	4A You shall not steal.	4B You shall not bear false witness against your fellow man.
5	5A You shall not covet your fellow man's house.	5B You shall not covet your fellow man's wife, or his male or female slave, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your fellow man's.

Five Pairs, Five Subjects

The last two Words are obviously a pair. Both begin “You shall not covet,” and their common subject announces itself: coveting.

The first two Words are also a pair. “I YHWH am your deity” and “You shall not swear falsely by the name of YHWH your deity” both refer directly to YHWH. The scroll marks them off as a pair. The only major paragraph division in the Decalogue, a *parashah petuḥah*, falls after the second Word. According to the other ways of dividing the text, that break falls after the third Word, where it has no evident purpose.

The third and fourth Words, the Sabbath and the honoring of parents, form a pair in several ways. They are the only two positive commands among the ten; the other eight are prohibitions.

Both contain a span of time: “six days” and “that you may long endure.” Both give a reason for the command, and both reasons name YHWH. The first reason looks back to the creation, “for in six days YHWH made heaven and earth.” The second looks forward, to a long life “on the land that YHWH your deity is giving you.” Lest there be any doubt, when Moses repeats the Ten Words in Deuteronomy 5, he adds the same phrase to both of these Words and to no others: “as YHWH your deity commanded you.” The common subject is YHWH’s involvement in human life through time.

That leaves four short prohibitions: You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness against your fellow man. All four concern offenses against another person. The first two are capital crimes in the Torah, and both involve the body. Between them they mark the two ends of the cycle of life, its taking and its making. Their common subject is human life itself. The last two concern ways of taking from another what belongs to him, his property or his good name.

A first look at the pairs gives us five provisional subjects: (1) YHWH; (2) YHWH and time; (3) the extent of human life; (4) possessions, meaning property and reputation; (5) coveting. We will refine them as we go.

Written Across Both Tablets

If the Words are pairs, the two columns of our table can stand for the two tablets. One tablet, which I will call A, holds the first Word of each pair. The other, B, holds the second. This goes against every traditional picture of the tablets, which divide the text into two blocks of five. Philo, for example, put the first five Words of the rabbinic division on one tablet and the last five on the other. Yet the Torah itself may describe the arrangement I am proposing. Exodus 32:15 says of the tablets: לַחֹת כְּתָבִים מִשְׁנֵי עֲבֵרֵיהֶם מִזֶּה וּמִזֶּה הֵם כְּתָבִים. I translate: “tablets written across both of their sides; on the one and on the other were they written.”

The rabbinic commentators had great difficulty with this verse. They read “both of their sides” as front and back, and concluded that the letters were cut right through the stone. That reading needs two miracles. The letters would have had to read correctly from both faces, though one face should show them reversed, and the enclosed centers of letters like the samekh would have had to hang in the air. No miracle is needed if we read the verse plainly. The term עֲבֵרִים, “sides,” never means front and back elsewhere in the Bible. In 1 Samuel 14:4 it appears together with “the one and the other,” as it does in Exodus, to describe a narrow pass: “a rocky crag on the one side, and a rocky crag on the other side.” The sides are side by side. The phrase מִזֶּה וּמִזֶּה, “on the one and on the other,” draws the same picture in the story of Balaam’s ass. The angel of YHWH stands in a narrow path between the vineyards, “a wall on this side and a wall on that side,” גִּדֵּר מִזֶּה וּגִדֵּר מִזֶּה (Numbers 22:24), and the ass, pressed against one of the walls, crushes Balaam’s foot against it. And when Moses’ hands grow heavy during the battle with

Amalek, Aaron and Hur hold them up, “one on this side and one on that side,” מזה אחד ומזה אחד (Exodus 17:12), standing side by side with Moses between them. In every one of these passages, “on the one and on the other” describes two things set side by side, never front and back. The Words were written across the two tablets, the first on one, the second on the other, the third on the first again, and so on. One tablet held the odd Words and the other the even. That is exactly the format of our table.

Why the Arrangement Matters

A careful reader may ask what difference the arrangement makes, since the content of the Words is the same however we lay them out. There are two answers. First, the arrangement restores the context of each Word, and whatever can be learned from context depends on knowing the structure. Second, and more important, the structure lets us read the ten Words as one composition. If the Words were composed in pairs, then each pair has a common subject. Those five subjects are new information. They are not written anywhere in the text. They appear only when the structure is recognized. This is what Strauss meant by reading between the lines.

The Pairs Form a Hierarchy

The five subjects are not random. They descend in order. The first pair concerns YHWH and His name, the most encompassing subject there is. The second still concerns YHWH, but no longer YHWH Himself; it concerns the ways He affects His creatures through time. YHWH does not appear at all in the third pair, which concerns human life. The fourth, concerning property and reputation, ranks below life itself. The fifth has no content beyond the inner life of a person, a feeling of desire that may never become an act. The pairs descend from the most universal subject to the most private.

The Pairs Form a Symmetry

The middle pair divides the five symmetrically. Above it, pairs 1 and 2 are connected with YHWH. Below it, pairs 4 and 5 are connected with property and the human will. Human life, the middle pair, has an upper side that touches the divine and a lower side that touches the world of possessions.

There is a second symmetry, a chiasm in the form A, B, C, B, A. The outer pairs, 1 and 5, resemble each other: both describe a being with feelings. YHWH describes Himself as “an impassioned deity,” a jealous one, and people are commanded to restrain their passion: “You shall not covet.” The structure invites us to compare YHWH Himself with the individual human person, the “I” or self.

The inner pairs, 2 and 4, resemble each other in their relation to the outer pairs. It is not hard to see how coveting (5) leads to theft and false testimony (4). The actions of pair 4 express the

will of the subjective person of pair 5. In the same way, the Sabbath and the honoring of parents (2) are actions that express the will of YHWH (1).

Together the symmetries give us a picture. At the two ends of the structure stand two unique beings, YHWH and the individual self. Between them lie three realms. Pair 2, closest to YHWH, contains actions that carry out the divine will. Pair 4, closest to the self, contains actions that carry out the human will. Pair 3, in the middle, is the place where YHWH and the self meet: physical human life, which joins what a person chooses with what no person controls, such as birth and death.

Figure 3. The five pairs as a symmetrical hierarchy

Pair	Subject	Relation
1	YHWH	One of the two unique beings
2	Actions based on divine will	Closer to YHWH
3	Physical human life	The meeting point of YHWH and the self
4	Actions based on human will	Closer to the self
5	Subjective human will: the self	The other unique being

It could be objected that we have moved from textual analysis to homily. That appearance is unavoidable once we accept that the text was built in pairs, because the common subject of a pair is never written. Naming it is an act of synthesis, and it should be judged by how well it integrates the parts without forcing them. Where possible, it should also be confirmed by independent evidence. Two of the Words supply such evidence. Each of them is built on the same five-part pattern.

The Sabbath Word Repeats the Pattern

The Sabbath Word, 2A, has five parts, and its middle part has five parts of its own.

Figure 4. The five parts of the Sabbath Word (2A), and the five parts of its center

Part	Subject	Text
a	Human holiness	Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.
b	Human labor	Six days you shall labor and do all your work,
c	The meeting of the human and the divine	but the seventh day is a Sabbath of YHWH your deity: you shall not do any work— I. you (the self) II. your son or daughter (dependent offspring) III. your male or female slave (dependent servants) IV. or your cattle (dependent livestock) V. or the stranger who is within your settlements (the dependent from outside the household)
d	Divine labor	For in six days YHWH made heaven and earth and sea, and all that is in them,
e	Divine holiness	and He rested on the seventh day; therefore YHWH blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.

The Word opens with human holiness, “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy” (a), and closes with divine holiness, “therefore YHWH blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it” (e). Human labor (b), “six days you shall labor,” is matched by divine labor (d), “for in six days YHWH made heaven and earth.” In the middle (c) the human and the divine meet: “the seventh day is a Sabbath of YHWH your deity: you shall not do any work.”

The middle element is itself ordered in five steps, from the near to the far: you yourself; your son or daughter; your male or female slave; your cattle; and the stranger within your settlements, the dependent from outside the household. At the center of this middle element stands the master and the slave. The relationship between YHWH and the person who keeps His Sabbath is projected onto the relationship between that person and those who depend on him. In this Word, a person’s relationship with YHWH is tested by the way that person treats the ones who depend on him for their wellbeing. The Sabbath Word is a small model of the whole Decalogue, with the divine and the human at its ends and their meeting point at its center.

The First Word Points to the Here and Now

The first Word, as the scroll divides it, also has five parts.

- a. I YHWH am your deity who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage.
- b. You shall have no other deities beside Me.
- c. You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness, of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth.
- d. You shall not bow down to them or serve them.
- e. For I YHWH your deity am an impassioned deity, visiting the guilt of the fathers upon the children, upon the third and fourth generations of those who reject Me, but showing

kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep My commandments.

The outer parts, a and e, both open with YHWH speaking of Himself in the first person: “I YHWH.” They form a frame around three prohibitions in the middle. The Word is ordered in time. Part a looks to the past, “who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” Part e looks to the future, “to the thousandth generation.” The prohibitions in between are in the present. Both parts of the frame describe YHWH’s actions; the middle describes human actions in relation to YHWH. But the last part, e, says something the first does not. YHWH’s future actions depend on human actions: He shows kindness “to those who love Me and keep My commandments.” The realm of human action is enclosed by the divine, and yet it shapes what the divine will do.

There are two more ordered triads inside the Word. The three prohibitions run through the three grammatical persons: “beside Me” (b), “make for yourself” (c), “bow down to them” (d). And the middle prohibition runs through three places: “the heavens above,” “the earth below,” “the waters under the earth.” Time, person and place are nested one inside the other.

Figure 5. The first Word: five parts and three nested triads

	a	b	c	d	e
Time	Past	Present			Future
Person		Me (beside Me)	You (make for yourself)	Them (bow down to them)	
Place			Above · Earth · Below <i>center: the earth</i>		
Focus			you, here and now		

When each of the three dimensions is reduced to its middle term, we are left with the present, the second person and the earth. The center of the first Word is a “you,” here and now, standing before the “I” who speaks. The first Word announces, through the arrangement of its parts, that its subject is the individual’s relationship with YHWH in the present moment. This is the same meeting point we found at the center of the five pairs and at the center of the Sabbath Word. (It is worth noting that the same three dimensions, time, person and place, appear in Sefer Yetzirah, perhaps the oldest surviving book of Jewish esoteric teaching, as shanah, nefesh and olam.)

Two Tablets: The Individual and Relationships

The arrangement in pairs explains the order of the Words. It does not yet explain why there are two tablets. Philo and the Mekhilta had an answer that suited their division: the first five Words mention the deity and the last five do not, so one tablet holds the laws between people and the deity and the other the laws between people and people. The answer was so satisfying that they accepted the price, which was the breaking up of the first Word and the merging of the two

prohibitions of coveting. If the Words were written in pairs across the tablets, we need a different answer. Tablet A holds Words 1, 3, 5, 7 and 9; tablet B holds Words 2, 4, 6, 8 and 10. There should be a distinction between the two sets that is basic enough to justify the making of two tablets. I will call such a distinction a divine dyad.

The Torah offers several divine dyads. The six days of creation fall into two cycles of three. On the first three days Elohim creates and names single entities, light, sky and earth, and each is defined by a separation: light from darkness, the waters above from the waters below, the dry land from the seas. On the next three days Elohim creates classes of things and does not name them: the lights, the birds and fish, the land animals and people. These are connected things. The lights rule and serve as signs; the living creatures are told to be fruitful and multiply. The two cycles are distinguished by the dyads one and many, separated and connected.

The two trees in the Garden show the same distinction. The Torah connects the trees with the tablets through the cherubim. Cherubim guard the way to the Tree of Life, and cherubim spread their wings over the ark that holds the tablets. In both places the deity's voice is present: YHWH Elohim's voice is heard in the Garden, and YHWH speaks with Moses from between the cherubim. The Tree of Life sustains the one who eats from it; its effect is personal and invisible to others. The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad has a social effect. Before eating, the man and woman were naked and not ashamed; afterward they were ashamed and covered themselves. Shame needs another person and a shared set of values. "Good and bad" are words, and words are spoken to someone. One tree concerns the individual; the other concerns relationships.

The two accounts of the making of humankind show it again. In Genesis 1, Elohim creates Adam, humankind, male and female, as a collective. In Genesis 2, YHWH Elohim forms "the man," always with the definite article, as a single individual, so alone that YHWH Elohim Himself observes, "It is not good that the man should be alone."

And the two sets of tablets show it once more. Moses carried the first tablets down the mountain in his hands. Had the people not made the golden calf, he would have shown them the tablets. The first tablets were meant for everyone. Before the second tablets were written, YHWH told Moses to make a box for them, and Moses placed them in it as soon as he received them. They were later placed in the ark in the Holy of Holies, and no one but Moses ever saw them. The set meant for the many was broken into pieces. The set meant for the one remained whole. This may be a hint that the exoteric reading of the Decalogue sees only separate Words, while the esoteric reading sees one unbroken composition.

Three observations connect this dyad to the two tablets. First, the middle pair labels the tablets. "You shall not murder," on tablet A, points to the Tree of Life. "You shall not commit adultery," on tablet B, points to the Tree of Knowledge, since the Hebrew word for knowledge is the word for carnal knowledge, as in "Adam knew Eve his wife." Second, the two prohibitions

of coveting differ in exactly this way. The Word on tablet A has a single object, the house. The Word on tablet B has many objects. The same distinction holds in the version in Deuteronomy, though the wording there is different. Third, tablet B is full of relationships that tablet A lacks. Honoring parents, adultery and coveting a wife all concern marriage and family. False testimony requires two witnesses who act together, as Deuteronomy 19:15 requires. A thief, on tablet A, needs no partner.

Intrinsic and Extrinsic

The middle pair sharpens the distinction. Both murder and adultery are capital crimes, but they differ in a way that matters here. Adultery depends on a social institution, marriage; without marriage there is no adultery. And adultery depends on a condition outside the act itself, the existence of the husband. If, unknown to the two people involved, the woman's husband had died before the act, there would be no adultery. Murder depends on nothing outside the act. The crime is in the killing. One crime is intrinsic to the act; the other is determined by something extrinsic to it.

The same dyad, intrinsic and extrinsic, distinguishes the other pairs. In pair 1, YHWH's revelation of Himself (1A) concerns who He is, while His name (1B) concerns the way He is grasped by others. In pair 5, the possessions listed in 5B are extrinsic to their owner. They make up his reputation, how others see him, but every one of them, even a wife, can come to belong to someone else. The "house" in 5A is something else. The Decalogue uses the word one other time, in 1A, where Egypt is called "the house of bondage." There "house" names what Egypt is. In Hebrew a "house" is also a family line, as in "the house of David" or "the house of Levi." A person cannot exchange his family line. In 5A the "house" is the inner identity of the fellow man, and coveting it is coveting who he is, not what he has.

Each Tablet Has Its Own Order

If each set of five Words was written on its own tablet, each should be ordered on its own. They are.

Tablet B is a series of relationships, arranged from the most permanent to the least: YHWH and His name; parents and children; husband and wife; two witnesses; an owner and his chattels. Read from the bottom up, the tablet describes the growth of a society. The desire for property (5B) requires a legal system (4B), which restrains the individual. The stability of the family (3B) makes possible the honoring of parents (2B), which gives long-term stability: if I am required to care for my parents, my children will be required to care for me. That stability is promised to the nation as a whole, "on the land that YHWH your deity is giving you." A stable society, finally, is one in which the divine name can be invoked to establish the truth (1B).

Tablet A is a series of separations: YHWH from other deities; the Sabbath from the other days; a life from a body; property from a person; a person's identity, his "house." Read from the top down, it describes the development of an individual. In 1A, the person is enclosed by YHWH, who occupies the past and the future, "I YHWH" at the beginning and "I YHWH" at the end, leaving the person only the present. In 2A, the person begins to resemble the deity. Like YHWH, he keeps the Sabbath and makes it holy; like YHWH, he has authority over others and is responsible for them; and through the command to "remember," he gains a relation to time. The holy is what is set apart, and the person who keeps the Sabbath shares in that quality. In 3A, the deity is no longer mentioned. The person stands as a living being, separate, whose life may not be taken. In 4A, the person has property of his own. In 5A, he has an identity of his own. Tablet A begins with YHWH as a unique being and ends with the individual as a unique being.

The two tablets also balance each other in length. In the Hebrew, Word 1A has 59 words and 1B has 17; 2A has 55 and 2B has 15. In both of the upper pairs, the Word on tablet A is more than three times as long as its partner. The middle pair is balanced, two words and two words. In the lower pairs the balance reverses: 4A has 2 words and 4B has 4; 5A has 4 and 5B has 11. The weight falls on tablet A where the subject is the divine will and on tablet B where the subject is the human will. It is worth noting that Philo and the Rabbis also taught that one tablet faced toward the deity and the other toward people, though they reached that conclusion with a different division. They may have received the teaching from their own teachers without the key that made sense of it.

Figure 6. The two tablets: the individual and relationships

Pair	Tablet A: the individual (separated, intrinsic)	Tablet B: relationships (connected, extrinsic)
1	YHWH Himself, set apart from other deities; the person enclosed by the divine "I" at beginning and end	YHWH and His name, the way He is grasped by others
2	The Sabbath set apart from the other days; the person resembles the deity in keeping it and in authority over dependents	Parents and children; the continuity of society on the land
3	A life set apart from the body; murder, where the crime is in the act itself	Husband and wife; adultery, determined by the husband, who is outside the act
4	Property set apart from a person; theft, which benefits the self	Two witnesses; false testimony, which harms another
5	Identity: the "house," which cannot pass to another	An owner and his chattels, which can

A True Table

We now have two principles of organization working at once. One runs down the five pairs, from YHWH to the self. The other runs across the two tablets, from the individual to relationships. Every Word stands at the intersection of a row and a column, and its meaning is

shaped by both. In the terms I have used elsewhere, the pairs are the weft threads and the tablets are the warp. The Decalogue is not a list. It is a woven text, a two-dimensional composition, and it is the paradigm on which the eighty-six literary units of the Torah were composed.

Read Upward as Well as Downward

One more feature of the woven Decalogue will matter a great deal when we come to Rabbi. Read in order, the Words descend, from “I YHWH” at the top to the private feeling of coveting at the bottom. But we saw that coveting (5) can lead to theft and false testimony (4). The pairs can be read upward as well as downward. Seen whole on the tablets, the Words describe a movement from YHWH to the individual and a movement from the individual’s inner life up toward YHWH. The ten Words, given as commands, are also the rungs of a ladder.

The Torah connects this with the tablets themselves. The tablets are called “the tablets of the covenant” and “the tablets of the testimony.” The ark that holds them is called “the ark of the covenant” and “the ark of the testimony.” And the ark is the place where YHWH meets Moses: “There I will meet with you, and I will speak with you from above the ark-cover, from between the two cherubim that are upon the ark of the testimony” (Exodus 25:22). The tablets in the ark testify to a covenant that runs in both directions, the possibility of meeting and speech between the deity and a person. The first Word already said as much. The deity encloses the person in time, and the deity’s future kindness depends on what the person does.

Part Two: The Pairs in Avot

A Tractate Unlike the Others

Avot stands apart among the sixty-three tractates of the Mishnah: it contains no laws. Its first four chapters appear to be a loose collection of sayings attributed to the sages of the centuries before the Mishnah was written. Its first chapter is arranged in chronological order. It begins with Moses and ends with Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel, the father of Rabbi, the author of the Mishnah, a span of more than fifteen hundred years by biblical reckoning.

The chapter opens: “Moses received torah from Sinai and handed it on to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets handed it on to the men of the Great Assembly.” The word is torah, instruction, not the Torah. Whatever this instruction was, it was something in addition to the written Torah, which according to Deuteronomy Moses gave to the priests and to all the tribes. The chapter describes knowledge that originated at Sinai, was not written down, and was entrusted to a few leaders in each generation. If that description is accurate, the subject of the first chapter of Avot is esoteric knowledge that Moses received at Sinai, at the same time that he received the tablets.

After the chain of transmission, the chapter quotes one saying in the name of each person who received the tradition. It begins with Simon the Just, the last of the men of the Great Assembly, who according to tradition met Alexander the Great when he passed through the land. Simon is followed by Antigonus of Soko, whose name recalls Antigonus the One-Eyed, Alexander’s general. Like his Greek namesake, he marks the start of a new age, the Hellenistic period, and a new division of power. As Alexander’s empire was divided among his successors, the Jews of the land, according to Rabbi, established a dual leadership: the nasi, the president or prince, and the av beit din, the chief justice. Avot presents the men who held these two offices as the bearers of the esoteric tradition over the next four centuries. Rabbi himself was the last to hold the title nasi.

A History That Cannot Be History

Avot presents five consecutive pairs of leaders, one pair to a generation, spanning the period from the arrival of Hellenism to the end of the Second Temple, roughly four hundred years. Five generations cannot cover four centuries. The author is not writing history as we understand it. His concern was to build a structure of five pairs, and the history serves the structure. It is likely that the sayings themselves were composed for the structure as well. It is hard to believe that the few words quoted here are all that survived from the earlier pairs, if those men existed at all. The detailed reading will show how closely the sayings were shaped to fit the author’s plan. Rabbi was willing to take liberties with history and to put words into the mouths of earlier generations. The question is why.

Readers who know the scholarship on Avot will ask whether Rabbi wrote this chapter at all. Many scholars hold that the tractate reached its final form after his lifetime, since its later chapters quote Rabbi himself and his son. Whatever the history of those later chapters, the composition of the five Pairs is built on the same woven paradigm as the chapters of the Mishnah, and, as we will see, it mirrors a reading of the Decalogue that no rabbinic writing states openly. I attribute it to the architect of the Mishnah on the strength of that design.

One more piece of evidence connects the Pairs with esoteric knowledge. In Avot the Pairs are named without their offices. They appear in only one other place in the Mishnah, the second chapter of tractate Ḥagigah, where their offices are given. There they appear as a list of five generations, each divided over a single question of law. Immediately before the list, the chapter sets out the rules for the study of esoteric subjects: “One does not expound on forbidden relationships with three, and not on the Act of Creation with two, and not on the Chariot with a single one, unless he was a wise man and understands himself.” This is the only explicit reference to esoteric teaching in the entire Mishnah. Its placement beside the only list of the Pairs with their offices connects the Pairs with esoteric knowledge. We will see that the connection is not accidental.

The Puzzle and the Maharal's Solution

Here is the puzzle of Avot. The stated subject of the chapter is the transmission of esoteric knowledge from Moses. Yet many of the sayings quoted in the names of those who received that knowledge are ordinary good advice: “Stay away from an evil neighbor.” They can hardly be the only surviving wisdom of men who inherited the teaching of Sinai. The gap between the frame and the content is so wide that it seems designed to make the reader uneasy.

The key to the puzzle is found in a little-read sixteenth-century commentary, *Derekh Ḥayyim*, by Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague, the Maharal (1525–1609). The Maharal read this section of Avot as a composition rather than a collection. He did not use such terms, but his explanation of how the parts relate to one another assumes it. Perhaps because his language is difficult and his ideas complex, the implications of his reading have not been appreciated.

The Maharal identified two principles of organization. The first runs between the members of each pair. In each generation the president speaks first and the chief justice second, and the Maharal saw a consistent difference between them:

You must know that the first, Yose ben Yoezer, was the president and the second, Yose ben Yoḥanan, was the chief justice. Now the presidency is exalted, and one whom YHWH has exalted and glorified will love YHWH for the exaltation bestowed upon him and will serve Him out of love, for he must be thankful for the goodness done to him, and therefore his instruction concerns love. The chief justice, as his title implies, is responsible for justice, and his instruction is connected with fear.

In every pair the president speaks from love and the chief justice from fear. The president tends to the positive and the chief justice to the negative: “acquire a comrade,” says one; “do not associate with the wicked,” says the other. This fits the traditional characters of Hillel and Shammai, the last pair. Hillel is remembered as lenient and welcoming, Shammai as strict. The Maharal’s reading suggests that the difference may lie in their offices rather than in their personalities.

The second principle runs from pair to pair. “The counsel of each pair adds to that of the previous pair,” the Maharal says. The circle of concern widens. The first pair speaks of conduct within one’s own house. The second goes out of the house to teachers, friends and neighbors. The third enters the formal world of the court. The fourth addresses those who hold power. The fifth embraces humanity as a whole: Hillel speaks of Aaron, who loved all people, and Shammai says, “greet everyone cheerfully.” The Maharal called this movement *hitpashtut*, spreading out.

In my terms, the Maharal found a weave. The difference between president and chief justice is the warp. The widening circles are the weft.

Figure 7. The five Pairs of Avot 1 as the Maharal read them

Pair	The Maharal: the widening circle	A: the president (love)	B: the chief justice (fear)
i	Conduct toward those closest, in one's own household	Yose ben Yoezer of Zeredah said: Let your house be a meeting place for the sages; sit in the dust of their feet, and drink in their words thirstily.	Yose ben Yoḥanan of Jerusalem said: Let your house be open wide; let the needy be part of your household. Do not speak too much with women. They said this of one's own wife; how much more is it true of another man's wife. Hence the sages said: When a man speaks too much with women he brings evil upon himself, neglects the study of the Law and in the end will come to perdition.
ii	Teacher, friends and neighbors, more distant but still close	Joshua ben Peraḥiah said: Get yourself a teacher, acquire a comrade, and give the benefit of the doubt.	Nittai the Arbelite said: Stay away from an evil neighbor, do not associate with the wicked, and do not despair of retribution.
iii	Those one judges and leads, more distant still	Judah ben Tabḥai said: Act not the part of counsel; while the litigants stand before you, regard them as guilty, but as they leave, regard them as innocent, for they have accepted the verdict.	Simon ben Shetaḥ said: Examine the witnesses thoroughly, and watch your words, lest they learn from them to lie.
iv	One who gives orders, set apart from the others by being over them	Shemaia said: Love labor, hate domination, and do not make yourself known to the ruling powers.	Avtalion said: Sages, watch your words, lest you incur the penalty of exile, and be banished to a place of evil waters, and the disciples that follow you drink and die, and the Heavenly Name be profaned.
v	All people, so that the bond of peace is not broken	Hillel said: Be of the students of Aaron, loving peace, pursuing peace, loving one's fellowmen and drawing them close to the Torah. He also said: He who invokes the Name will lose his name; he who adds not will be taken away; he who studies not deserves death; and he who makes use of the Crown will soon be gone. He also said: If I am not for myself, who will be for me; and if I am only for myself, what am I; and if not now, when?	Shammai said: Make regular your study of the Torah; say little and do much; and greet everyone cheerfully.

The names of the speakers follow a progression of their own. In the first pair both names have three parts, a personal name, a father's name and a place: Yose ben Yoezer of Zeredah, Yose ben Yoḥanan of Jerusalem. Both speakers share the name Yose, just as both of their sayings begin with the same words. In the third pair the names have the standard form, "A son of B." The second pair stands between them: Joshua ben Peraḥiah has the standard form, while Nittai the Arbelite is named by his place, like the first pair. The fourth and fifth pairs are named

by their personal names alone, and the names of the fifth are shorter than those of the fourth. The names grow simpler from generation to generation. We now have three independent principles at work in parallel: the chronological order, the widening circles of concern, and the shortening of the names. This is not a chance collection or a historical accretion. It is a composition, and its author took great care with it.

The Maharal noticed one more thing, which he only hints at. The members of the first pair begin “close” to one another, using the very same words. “The succeeding pairs draw farther apart.” The process ends with the separate schools of Hillel and Shammai. The Maharal seems to have read this historically, as the hardening of two offices over time, colored perhaps by the well-known division between the two schools. I want to suggest a different explanation, one that does not depend on history and that leads directly to the esoteric reading.

The Progression of Literary Devices

The growing distance between the members of each pair is created by a literary device that changes from pair to pair. In each pair the two sayings share a common frame of reference, but the means by which the reader recognizes it are different each time.

In the first pair the device is identical language. Both sayings begin “Let your house be.” Nothing could be plainer.

In the second pair there is no shared opening, but the two sayings are cast in the same mold. Each has three parts. The first two parts of each concern close personal contacts, and both second parts share the root ח-ב-ר, חָבַר: “acquire a comrade,” וְקִנְיָה לְךָ חָבֵר, and “do not associate with the wicked,” וְאַל תִּתְּחַבֵּר לְרָשָׁע. The third part of each concerns a general attitude rather than a particular relationship. The link is precise, but it is no longer on the surface.

In the third pair there is no shared language and no shared form. Yet the two sayings are obviously addressed to the same person, a judge sitting in court. The link now lies entirely in their content.

The devices move from the outside of the text to its inside: from identical words, to shared structure, to shared subject. The reader is drawn steadily deeper into the sayings to find what they have in common. The Maharal’s “drawing apart” is real, but it is a matter of form, not of content.

A Ladder of Audiences

The widening circles also correspond to social roles. The first pair concerns the house, and its figure is the householder, the ordinary layman. The third pair concerns the court, and its figure is the judge. The second pair is less obvious, but its shared word supplies the answer. A ḥaver, “comrade,” was also the title of a member of the academy, a student. So the circles form a

ladder: householder, student, judge. The higher the rung, the fewer the people who stand on it and the greater their influence.

Every saying in the Pairs is an imperative. The judges of the third pair are not offering a theory of justice; they are telling judges what to do. Each pair addresses a particular audience, and the literary device used in each pair suits its audience. The layman needs to hear the same words twice to know that both speakers are talking about the same thing. The student, the *ḥaver*, whose title means one who connects, is able to see a subtler connection of structure and shared root. The judge is concerned with content alone; he is told to examine the witnesses and has no use for surface resemblances.

From this we can predict the fourth pair. It should address someone above the judge, and its device should go beyond the content of its two sayings.

A Word to the Wise

Shemaia said: Love labor, hate domination, and do not make yourself known to the ruling powers. Avtalion said: Sages, watch your words, lest you incur the penalty of exile, and be banished to a place of evil waters, and the disciples that follow you drink and die, and the Heavenly Name be profaned.

Avtalion addresses his words to “sages,” *ḥakhamim*. The next rung above the judge is the sage, and the text says so outright. Shemaia’s saying is clear once we know its audience. “Hate domination” could be read as a call to rebellion, which is hardly likely. Addressed to sages, it means: those of you chosen to lead must love the work itself and not the privileges that come with it.

But notice how we reached this. The word “sages” is not where our analysis begins. It is the fulfillment of a prediction. Only a reader who followed the first three pairs, saw the ladder they form and expected the next rung to be higher than the judge would recognize what Avtalion’s word confirms. The device of the fourth pair is not in the text of the pair at all. It is in the reader. A word to the wise is sufficient, when the word is “the wise.”

The Reader Is Activated

The fourth pair cannot be understood on its own terms. It requires the reader to hold the first three pairs in mind and to see the rule they establish. The text has made the reader active. This has two consequences.

First, Avot is not a collection. If the fourth pair is unintelligible without the first three, the text was written by one hand. The popular collection of sayings has turned out to be a composition, and the turn takes place in words addressed to sages.

Second, the composition is esoteric. Avtalion’s saying, which otherwise seems obscure, reads as a warning to those who have begun to see the composition beneath the collection. I

suggest that the key is the word for exile, גלות, galut, which can also be read galot, “revealing.” Watch your words, lest you be made to reveal more than you should. Not all knowledge can be passed on openly. Shemaia’s “do not make yourself known to the ruling powers” adds that open teaching can endanger the teacher. Avtalion adds that it can endanger the student: “the disciples that follow you drink and die.” The image of knowledge as water has appeared before. In the first pair, the householder was told to “sit in the dust of their feet and drink in their words thirstily.” The beginner, eager to drink, may take in ideas he cannot yet digest. The teacher must take care.

The water image creates a closure between the first pair and the fourth. In both, sages speak and disciples drink. But the perspective has changed. In the first pair the reader is addressed as a thirsty disciple. In the fourth, the reader is addressed as a sage. The education of the reader is complete. The reader who has followed the analysis this far discovers that he or she is being addressed by the author, who has been just out of sight all along, encouraging each step. The progression of devices was more than a way of linking sayings. It was a course of instruction in reading between the lines.

For eighteen centuries readers have enjoyed the sayings of Avot one by one, and teachers have built countless sermons on them. The reader who grasps the text as a whole is forced to say that it is a single composition, and that it says something the individual sayings do not. Is that reader free to announce this in the marketplace? This is the very question Avtalion raises. The author created a vehicle that passes knowledge to the few who can profit from it while keeping it from the many, and at the same time gave the many a book they could use with profit. The lasting popularity of Avot is the measure of his skill.

One at the Top

The ladder has had four rungs: layman, student, judge, sage. Each holds fewer people than the one below it. The fifth is the top, and at the top there is room for only one. Who stands there? The answer is unavoidable: the reader who has come this far.

The reader who now sees that the “historical collection” is a composition must go back and read it again as a whole, and must find a reading that joins the sayings of the fifth pair to all that came before. That reading cannot be supplied by the text. Each reader must produce it, according to his or her own powers of analysis and synthesis, while keeping faith with the structure. The ladder, having brought the reader to the top, falls away. It was built to place the individual reader at its apex, and from there the reader must create a reading of his or her own. In doing so the reader joins the process described in the first sentence of Avot, the handing on of torah from Moses to Joshua and onward. To be maintained, tradition must be continually created, and careful reading is the condition for creating it.

My Reading of the Pairs

What follows is my own integrated reading, offered in that spirit.

Rabbi has helped us by marking two sayings as exceptions. The saying of Yose ben Yoḥanan (1B) and the sayings of Hillel (5A) are much longer than the other eight.

Figure 8. The two enlarged sayings: Yose ben Yoḥanan (1B) and Hillel (5A)

1B: three speakers	5A: three sayings
Yose ben Yoḥanan of Jerusalem said: Let your house be open wide; let the needy be part of your household. Do not speak too much with women.	Hillel said: Be of the students of Aaron, loving peace, pursuing peace, loving one's fellowmen and drawing them close to the Torah.
They said this of one's own wife; how much more is it true of another man's wife.	He also said: He who invokes the Name will lose his name; he who adds not will be taken away; he who studies not deserves death; and he who makes use of the Crown will soon be gone.
Hence the sages said: When a man speaks too much with women he brings evil upon himself, neglects the study of the Law and in the end will come to perdition.	He also said: If I am not for myself, who will be for me; and if I am only for myself, what am I; and if not now, when?

Yose ben Yoḥanan's saying contains three voices. He says, "Do not speak too much with women." An unnamed voice adds, "They said this of one's own wife; how much more is it true of another man's wife." And a third voice, "the sages," draws a conclusion: "When a man speaks too much with women he brings evil upon himself, neglects the study of the Law and in the end will come to perdition." Hillel, by contrast, is given three separate sayings, the only speaker in the chapter with more than one. The first is a second-person command, like all the others. The second is in the third person. The third is in the first person: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?"

The two exceptions are inverted parallels. One stands at the beginning of column B, the other at the end of column A. One is enlarged by two additional speakers; the other by two additional sayings of the same speaker. The additions to Yose ben Yoḥanan come from outside him; they are extrinsic. The additions to Hillel come from Hillel himself; they are intrinsic. This suggested to me that the dyad intrinsic and extrinsic, or self and other, could replace the Maharal's love and fear as the distinction between the two columns.

Read this way, each pair contains one saying that points inward, to the individual, and one that points outward, to the individual's contacts with the world. The five pairs describe a person growing from dependence on what comes from outside to independence. At the beginning the person is a vessel to be filled, an empty house: "Let your house be open wide." Even the inner person is fed from outside: "drink in their words thirstily." At the end, Hillel says, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" The three middle pairs carry the person from one condition to the other.

The same contrast appears in the second chapter of Avot, where Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai, who received the tradition from Hillel and Shammai, describes his five disciples. The first is “a sealed cistern which loses not a drop.” The last is “a spring that ever flows stronger.” Both are images of water. The first only holds it. The last is a growing source.

Hillel and Shammai

The fifth pair belongs to a different class from the others. We know very little about the first four pairs, and their rulings left little mark on Jewish law. Hillel and Shammai are both the last leaders of the Second Temple period and the founders of two schools, the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai, whose disputes, more than three hundred of them recorded in the Talmud, became the foundation of the law of the rabbinic period. It is not too much to say that the five-pair structure was built to present Hillel and Shammai as the last stage of a five-stage process.

The word that links the beginning of the process to its end is “house.” The first pair begins “Let your house be.” The fifth pair founded the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai. The private home of the first pair has become, by the fifth, a house that shaped its spiritual descendants for two thousand years. This is close to the Maharal’s own description of the process: “the passage from potential to actual.” The fourth pair addressed leaders of the community. Through their schools, Hillel and Shammai went beyond their own time and place and created the framework of the future. If the process ends in a call to the reader to shape the future as they did, it is clear why the author embedded the message so deeply. The beloved little book of sayings carries a call for the continuous creation of tradition. The reader is invited to become a partner in shaping a changing reality.

The Society of the Students of Aaron

If the whole structure was built to bring the reader to the top as a participant in the creation of tradition, then the opening of the fifth pair is the place to welcome the reader. Hillel’s first saying is that welcome: “Be of the students of Aaron, loving peace, pursuing peace, loving one’s fellowmen and drawing them close to the Torah.” This is the first mention of the written Torah anywhere in the Pairs. At the very point where the author begins to address the individual reader, he does so through the most fixed role in the Torah, the high priest.

Aaron held the highest office in the Torah’s order. Moses, the prophet, spoke with YHWH continually but held no defined office. Aaron’s contact with the holy was governed by a prescribed procedure. As high priest he possessed a method for entering the closest possible contact with the holy, both as an individual and as the representative of the people. Yet Hillel does not say “be like Aaron.” He says, “be of the students of Aaron.” Aaron had no students in the Torah, and nothing in the Torah describes him as loving or pursuing peace. Hillel has

invented both. It is as if he has given a name to the society the reader has just joined, and said: welcome to the society of the students of Aaron.

The figure of Aaron both restrains and encourages. It restrains the reader from rushing into the holy place with strange fire, as Aaron's sons did, and died. It assures the reader that there is a method for approaching the holy, known to the students of Aaron. The conditions for learning it are the ones Hillel names. "Loving peace, pursuing peace" belongs to the private realm. "Loving one's fellowmen and drawing them close to the Torah" belongs to the public realm. The high priest enters the Holy of Holies alone and returns to the people waiting in the courtyard. So the student of Aaron must first find peace within, in order to stand alone before YHWH, and then return to the community to bring the experience of the holy to others.

Hillel's third saying confirms that the reader has become a participant. "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" The first person puts the responsibility squarely on the reader, as if Hillel were saying, "Repeat after me." The reader has been activated.

Lest the activated reader, now a spring that ever flows stronger, cause a flood, Shammai has the last word. Hillel has described the last stage of a person's inner development. Shammai describes the face that person shows the world. "Greet everyone cheerfully" is, more literally, "receive all of humanity with a pleasant face," בסבר פנים יפות. The pleasant face may also be a mask over the moving waters within, much like the pleasant exoteric face of Avot itself.

What the Pairs Have Shown

The first chapter of Avot lists the men who received and passed on a tradition that Moses received at Sinai. Its sayings seemed too slight for such a frame. We can now see that the passage can be read in two ways. The popular reading takes each saying on its own. The esoteric reading joins the ten sayings into a single structure that contains a five-stage process, and the process ends by bringing the reader to hear the author's voice from within the text. Perhaps the clearest statement the author makes is that there is an author, not an editor or a collector.

Technically, the Pairs are a weave. Only a reader who works out its two principles of organization, the warp and the weft, can begin to explore what it says. To everyone else the composition is invisible. The frame of the chapter is the transmission of esoteric knowledge, and the chapter demonstrates a method for transmitting esoteric knowledge. The frame and the content agree after all.

What remains is the question with which we began: why did Rabbi build this composition as five pairs? The answer is that he was writing a commentary on another composition of five pairs.

Part Three: Rabbi's Commentary on the Decalogue

Two Compositions of Five Pairs

Rabbi reports that esoteric knowledge, going back to Moses at Sinai, was handed down to a few people in each generation. His report includes a composition of five pairs. We have seen how he embedded an esoteric composition within ten apparently independent sayings attributed to ten bearers of the tradition. We now set that composition beside the Decalogue read as five pairs of Words. The analysis is detailed, perhaps tiresome in places, so I will state the conclusion first. Throughout, the reader should keep two things apart: the parallels themselves, which anyone can check in the tables, and what I propose they mean. Rabbi planned the Pairs as an expansion of, and a commentary on, the woven Decalogue. The correspondence between the two compositions is the cornerstone for verifying both the woven structure of the Torah and the woven structure of the Mishnah, and the relationship between them.

The two compositions share five broad characteristics.

First, both are tied to Sinai. Avot opens, “Moses received torah from Sinai and handed it on to Joshua.” The Decalogue was spoken at Sinai out of fire and smoke, and later written on two tablets that Moses received there.

Second, both are ordered hierarchically. The Decalogue descends from YHWH in pair 1 to the inner life of the individual in pair 5. The Pairs ascend from the householder to the single reader at the top.

Third, both consist of five pairs.

Fourth, both can be read either as collections or as integrated compositions.

Fifth, both are woven compositions of warp and weft. Every one of their ten elements is the product of two independent lines of planning: the division into two columns, and the five-stage progression.

The fifth similarity alone would justify a close comparison. Both texts are examples of a nearly unknown form, the literary weave. Taken together, the five similarities demand it.

Turning One Composition Upside Down

There is one technical problem to solve before the comparison can begin. Where do we start? The obvious answer is to compare the first pair of each composition with the first pair of the other. The better answer is to invert one of them, and compare the first pair of the Pairs with the fifth pair of the Decalogue.

The reason is that the two hierarchies run in opposite directions. The Decalogue begins at the top, with YHWH speaking in the first person. The Pairs begin at the bottom, with the private

householder. To compare them level by level, one must be turned over. A formal parallel confirms this. Both sayings of the first pair in Avot begin with the same words, “Let your house be.” Both Words of the fifth pair in the Decalogue begin with the same words, “You shall not covet.” These are the bottoms of the two hierarchies, and each is marked in the same way. I call the matched levels “sets” and number them I to V. The pairs of the Decalogue are numbered 1 to 5 and the Pairs of Avot i to v.

Figure 9. The levels of the two compositions compared

Set	Avot Pair	Decalogue pair
I	i: the householder, the layman	5: the subjective individual
II	ii: the student, the neighbor	4: actions based on human will
III	iii: the judge	3: physical human life
IV	iv: the sage, those with power	2: actions based on divine will
V	v: the single individual, the reader	1: YHWH

Once the two texts are set side by side in this order, an extensive set of parallels appears.

Figure 10. Linguistic parallels between the Decalogue and the Pairs

Set	Decalogue	Avot
I	לא תחמד ... לא תחמד both Words begin “You shall not covet”	יהי ביתך ... יהי ביתך both sayings begin “Let your house be”
I	לא תחמד בית רעך “your fellow man’s house”	יהי ביתך “your house”
I	לא תחמד אשת רעך “your fellow man’s wife”	קל וחומר באשת חברו “how much more ... another man’s wife”
II	לא תגנב “You shall not steal”	וקנה לך חבר “acquire (buy) a comrade”
II	רעך “your fellow man”	שכן “neighbor”
IV	ששת ימים תעבד ועשית כל מלאכתך “six days you shall labor”	אהב את המלאכה “love labor”
IV	השמים ... הים “heaven ... sea”	מקום מים ... שמים “a place of waters ... Heaven”
IV	למען יארכון ימך על האדמה “that you may long endure on the land”	שמא תחובו חובת גלות “lest you incur the penalty of exile”
V	אנכי יהוה אלהיך “I YHWH your deity,” the first person	אם אין אני לי “If I am not for myself,” the first person
V	לא תשא את שם יהוה אלהיך לשוא כי לא ינקה misuse of the Name, with a punishment	נגד שמא אבד שמה “He who invokes the Name will lose his name”
V	לאהבי ולשמרי מצותי “those who love Me and keep My commandments”	אוהב את הבריות ומקרבת לתורה “loving one’s fellowmen and drawing them close to the Torah”

The five shared characteristics and these linguistic parallels are sufficient evidence that Rabbi knew the arrangement of the Decalogue in five pairs and planned his composition to reflect it. That justifies, and in fact requires, a reading set by set. We will pay particular attention to the ways Rabbi shaped his sayings as responses to the Words beside them. In the comparison an ongoing conversation emerges between Rabbi and the Decalogue.

Set I: The Inner Realm

Figure 11. Set I: Decalogue pair 5 and Avot Pair i

	A	B
Decalogue 5	You shall not covet your fellow man's house.	You shall not covet your fellow man's wife, or his male or female slave, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your fellow man's.
Avot i	Yose ben Yoezer of Zeredah said: Let your house be a meeting place for the sages; sit in the dust of their feet, and drink in their words thirstily.	Yose ben Yoḥanan of Jerusalem said: Let your house be open wide; let the needy be part of your household. Do not speak too much with women. They said this of one's own wife; how much more is it true of another man's wife. Hence the sages said: When a man speaks too much with women he brings evil upon himself, neglects the study of the Law and in the end will come to perdition.

The first thing Rabbi does is lock in the division of the scroll. The main difference between the scroll's division of the Decalogue and the rabbinic one is whether the two prohibitions of coveting are one Word or two. By beginning his composition with two sayings that open with identical words, "Let your house be," Rabbi testifies that the two "You shall not covet" are two Words. Even the names of the speakers begin the same way: "Yose ben ... of."

The parallel goes beyond the identical openings. The first Word of the pair prohibits coveting a house; both sayings begin with "house." The second Word prohibits coveting "your fellow man's wife"; the second saying speaks of "another man's wife." The artifice is plain. The other man's wife enters the saying only through what looks like an editorial gloss: "They said this of one's own wife; how much more is it true of another man's wife." Whatever Yose ben Yoḥanan may or may not have said, this parallel with the Decalogue was made by Rabbi. It is his signature.

Set side by side, the two pairs also share a theme. We called the subject of the fifth pair of Words the subjective individual. The first Pair in Avot is concerned with what happens inside one's own house. Both concern an inner realm: in the Decalogue, inner feeling; in Avot, the inside of the home. Rabbi's picture of what happens within confirms the reading of the two prohibitions of coveting as pointing to inner experience.

The heavy-handed gloss does more than sign the work. The saying of Yose ben Yoḥanan ends, “Do not speak too much with women.” Everything after that is a self-declared appendix in two layers: “They said this,” followed by “Hence the sages said.” Modern and traditional scholars alike take the layers as later additions to an original saying. I suggest that all three parts were composed by Rabbi and that his plan needs all three. There are many multi-voiced statements in the legal tractates of the Mishnah, but this is the only one in Avot.

The layers draw our attention to the sages. In the first saying the sages are intrinsic: the house is to be “a meeting place for the sages,” and their words are to be drunk in thirstily. In the second they are brought in at third hand, plainly outside the original saying. By making the distinction so obvious, Rabbi makes us sensitive to the dyad intrinsic and extrinsic, and so prompts us to ask whether it applies to the other pairs, and to the Decalogue. It does. It returns us to the difference between the “house” of 5A, a person’s identity, which cannot pass to another, and the possessions of 5B, which can.

Rabbi’s sayings can also be read as answers to the Words beside them. To “You shall not covet your fellow man’s house,” he replies, “Let your house be a meeting place for the sages.” If your own house is full of sages, what is there to covet in your neighbor’s? To “You shall not covet ... anything that is your fellow man’s,” he replies, “Let your house be open wide; let the needy be part of your household.” Living closely with the poor creates the sense that “there but for the grace of God go I,” and dissolves the desire for another’s property. We will see many of the sayings respond to their Words in this way.

Set II: The Link

Figure 12. Set II: Decalogue pair 4 and Avot Pair ii

	A	B
Decalogue 4	You shall not steal.	You shall not bear false witness against your fellow man.
Avot ii	Joshua ben Peraḥiah said: Get yourself a teacher, acquire a comrade, and give the benefit of the doubt.	Nittai the Arbelite said: Stay away from an evil neighbor, do not associate with the wicked, and do not despair of retribution.

The second pair of Avot showed us what I call the flow technique. The names in the second Pair look both ways. “Joshua ben Peraḥiah” has the standard form of the third Pair; “Nittai the Arbelite” is named by his place, like the first. The second Pair joins the first and third.

Rabbi took this technique from the Decalogue. In the Decalogue’s pair 4, “You shall not bear false witness against your fellow man” contains the expression “your fellow man,” which appears in both Words of pair 5. “You shall not steal,” two words in Hebrew, לא תגנב, a negative and a single verb without an object, has exactly the form of both Words of pair 3, לא תרצח and

לא תנאף. So pair 4 contains one Word shaped like pair 5 in its content and one shaped like pair 3 in its form. It is the link between them.

Figure 13. The flow technique in Decalogue pairs 5, 4 and 3

Pair	A	B
5	לא תחמד בית רעך You shall not covet your fellow man's house.	לא תחמד אשת רעך ועבדו ואמתו ושורו וחמרו וכל אשר לרעך You shall not covet your fellow man's wife, or his male or female slave, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your fellow man's.
4	לא תגנב You shall not steal. Two words, like pair 3.	לא תענה ברעך עד שקר You shall not bear false witness against your fellow man. "Your fellow man," like pair 5.
3	לא תרצח You shall not murder.	לא תנאף You shall not commit adultery.

Rabbi amplified the technique. He used it not only in the names of the second Pair but in the content of their sayings.

Figure 14. The flow technique in the content of Avot Pair ii

	iiA: Joshua ben Peraḥiah	iiB: Nittai the Arbelite
a (looks back to Pair i)	עשה לך רב Get yourself a teacher	הרחק משכן רע Stay away from an evil neighbor
b (the link: חבר, connect)	וקנה לך חבר acquire a comrade	ואל תתחבר לרשע do not associate with the wicked
c (looks ahead to Pair iii)	והוי דן את כל האדם לכף זכות and give the benefit of the doubt (judge everyone favorably)	ואל תתיאש מן הפרענות and do not despair of retribution

Each saying has three parts, a, b and c. In each, the first part looks back to the first Pair and the third part looks forward to the third. Joshua ben Peraḥiah's "get yourself a teacher" recalls Yose ben Yoezer's house full of sages whose words are drunk thirstily. Nittai's "stay away from an evil neighbor" uses the same word, ra, "evil," that ends the second saying of the first Pair, "he brings evil upon himself." The third part of each saying concerns judgment, and the third Pair is addressed to judges. "Give the benefit of the doubt" means, more literally, "judge everyone favorably." That leaves the middle parts, b, as the parts unique to this Pair, and they share the root ḥ-b-r, "comrade" and "associate," whose basic meaning is "connect." The second Pair is a small model of the first three: a, b, c answer to i, ii, iii. Rabbi used the same technique in the names and in the content of this Pair. He must have considered it very important.

The middle parts are also where Rabbi answers the Decalogue. To "You shall not steal" he answers "acquire," literally "buy," a comrade: וקנה לך חבר. The answer to theft is purchase. To

“You shall not bear false witness” he answers “do not associate with the wicked.” Testimony in the Torah requires two witnesses, so false testimony requires two wicked people working together. Avoid the wicked and the collusion cannot happen. The two answers also clarify a distinction between the two Words. The thief acts to benefit himself. The false witness acts to harm another, not necessarily for his own gain. Rabbi’s “acquire” benefits the one who acquires; his “do not associate with the wicked” prevents harm.

If Avot is a commentary on the Decalogue, the function of the second Pair, to connect the first and third, should also be the function of the Decalogue’s pair 4: to connect pair 5 with pair 3. That is a test of the whole theory. To pass it, the subjects of pair 4 must connect the subjects of pair 5 with those of pair 3. We will see that they do.

Set III: The Other

Figure 15. Set III: Decalogue pair 3 and Avot Pair iii

	A	B
Decalogue 3	You shall not murder.	You shall not commit adultery.
Avot iii	Judah ben Tabbai said: Act not the part of counsel; while the litigants stand before you, regard them as guilty, but as they leave, regard them as innocent, for they have accepted the verdict.	Simon ben Shetaḥ said: Examine the witnesses thoroughly, and watch your words, lest they learn from them to lie.

Rabbi addresses his third Pair to judges. Exodus 23:7, addressed to a judge, seems to have shaped his response to the Decalogue: אל תהרג ונקי וצדיק שקר תרחק וגו', “distance yourself from deceit, and do not kill the blameless and innocent.” Its second clause parallels “You shall not murder.” Its first clause is echoed in Simon ben Shetaḥ’s “watch your words, lest they learn from them to lie.” The verse is a bridge between the Decalogue and the Mishnah, and the bridge is built for judges.

Figure 16. Exodus 23:7 as a bridge between the Decalogue and Avot

	A	B
Decalogue 3	You shall not murder.	You shall not commit adultery.
Exodus 23:7 (to judges)	and do not kill the blameless and innocent	distance yourself from deceit (lying)
Avot iii (to judges)	Judah ben Tabbai said: Act not the part of counsel; while the litigants stand before you, regard them as guilty, but as they leave, regard them as innocent, for they have accepted the verdict.	Simon ben Shetaḥ said: Examine the witnesses thoroughly, and watch your words, lest they learn from them to lie.

Rabbi’s audience of judges could not have read his instructions without the Torah’s instructions to judges in mind. But the connection goes further. Rabbi has answered the capital

crimes of the Decalogue's middle pair by bringing them into a court, with judges, litigants and witnesses. One of the Hebrew words for judges is *elohim*, the same word as the divine name *Elohim*. In the Decalogue, the middle pair is the meeting point of the human and the divine, physical human life. In Rabbi's parallel, the middle Pair is occupied by a human being who bears the divine name and holds the power of life and death. Rabbi seems to agree that the middle of the Decalogue is a meeting point of this kind. We will see this reinforced in sets IV and V, where Rabbi refers to YHWH.

There is no linguistic or formal link between the two sayings of the third Pair, and none between the Pair and the Decalogue. This is consistent with Rabbi's plan. In each of the first three sets, he connects his Pair to the Decalogue by the same device he uses to connect the two sayings of the Pair to each other. In set I the device was identical openings; in set II it was the flow of structure. In set III the device is the one Rabbi recommends: examine the witnesses thoroughly. The two members of each pair must be examined for their content alone.

When we do, a common distinction appears. Judah ben Tabbari speaks of litigants, who are directly affected by the judge's decision. Simon ben Shetaḥ speaks of witnesses, who are not. Murder directly connects the criminal and the victim. The "victim" of adultery, the husband, is not a party to the act. And we saw that murder is intrinsic to the act of killing while adultery is determined by something extrinsic to the act. Ben Tabbari's advice concerns the judge's own conduct, "act not the part of counsel"; it is intrinsic to his role. Ben Shetaḥ's advice concerns the effect of the judge's words on others; it is extrinsic.

Integrating the First Three Sets

The first three sets now form a pattern. Set I concerns the inner life, the subjective self. Set II, through the root ḥ-b-r, concerns the individual's connections, the friends and neighbors just beyond the self, and its function is to link set I with set III. Set III concerns the judge, who must be objective. Ben Tabbari warns the judge not to act like an advocate, who argues a position for a fee, but to pursue the truth. His objectivity is the opposite of the subjectivity of set I.

Both Words of the Decalogue's pair 3 prohibit acts that involve direct contact with another person. The objective world is the world of the other, and these Words guarantee the continued existence of the other. The dyad self and other may describe the difference between sets I and III better than subjective and objective. Then set II is the link between the self and the other. Property, "You shall not steal," and a legal system, "You shall not bear false witness," are good choices to express what both binds the self to the other and separates them. Private property and the courts define a space in which self and other meet and interact, and they regulate the meeting. Through the progression of his literary devices, Rabbi has led us to his understanding of the lower three pairs of the Decalogue: 5, the self; 4, the link between the self and the other; 3, the other. This is the test we set for the theory, and it passes.

“Self” and “other” seem to set the limits of our experience of the world. Moving upward, we must find a subject that in some way goes beyond the otherness of the other. We know that pairs 2 and 1 of the Decalogue are connected with YHWH. The symmetry we found in Part One then gives us the full scheme, from the bottom up:

5. the self
4. the link between the self and the other
3. the other
2. the link between the other and YHWH
1. YHWH

Set IV: The Other as the Link to the Transcendent

Figure 17. Set IV: Decalogue pair 2 and Avot Pair iv

	A	B
Decalogue 2	Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of YHWH your deity: you shall not do any work—you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, or your cattle, or the stranger who is within your settlements. For in six days YHWH made heaven and earth and sea, and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day; therefore YHWH blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.	Honor your father and your mother, that you may long endure on the land that YHWH your deity is giving you.
Avot iv	Shemaia said: Love labor, hate domination, and do not make yourself known to the ruling powers.	Avtalion said: Sages, watch your words, lest you incur the penalty of exile, and be banished to a place of evil waters, and the disciples that follow you drink and die, and the Heavenly Name be profaned.

This set is crowded with parallels. The word *melakhah*, “labor,” appears in both: “six days you shall labor and do all your work” and “love labor.” Both speak of exile from the land: “that you may long endure on the land that YHWH your deity is giving you,” and “lest you incur the penalty of exile.” These two parallels are enough to show that Rabbi read the two positive commands as a pair. Notice that both run straight across: labor joins the first Word to the first saying, and the land joins the second Word to the second saying.

Yet Rabbi created a third parallel, and it runs diagonally. It does not replace the straight links; it is laid over them. It joins the first Word of the pair, the Sabbath, to the second saying, Avtalion’s. The link is threefold: heaven and heaven, sea and water, and “hallowed” and “profaned.” The last two are the final Hebrew words of their passages. Rabbi has given his

sayings the dimension of holiness to match the Words. This is the first set in which holiness and the divine name appear. Why add a diagonal thread?

The answer lies in the scheme. The first three sets established the self, the link between self and other, and the other. The fourth should be the link between the other and what transcends the other. That is exactly what Avtalion's saying does. It begins with its audience, the sages. It continues with the others with whom the sages are in contact, their disciples. And it ends with what transcends them both. The death of the disciples leads to the profaning of the Heavenly Name. Just as the word "sages" at the beginning of his saying confirmed our prediction of the next rung on the ladder, the "Heavenly Name" at its end confirms our prediction of the fourth set. The other is the link to the transcendent.

The concept that unites the set is sanctification, the setting apart of something for the sake of another. Each Word and each saying contains an act done for someone else. The Sabbath is kept for YHWH's sake, and it is kept by the household, the dependents, and the stranger. Parents are honored. Shemaia's sages are to be modest public servants; Avtalion's are to be careful teachers. After the crimes and courts of set III, this is a picture of a society in which the needs of the other and of the community are recognized.

The two second members also share a reason that stands apart from their commands. "Honor your father and your mother, that you may long endure on the land," and "watch your words, lest you incur the penalty of exile." In both, the reason is life on the land, and in both there is no evident causal link between the command and its reason. Both refer to the divine: "YHWH your deity" in the Word, and "the Heavenly Name" in the saying. In this set, unlike set II, Rabbi's language reinforces the Decalogue rather than answering it: six days of labor, love labor; long life on the land, avoid exile.

Set V: The First Person

Figure 18. Set V: Decalogue pair 1 and Avot Pair v

	A	B
Decalogue 1	I YHWH am your deity who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage. You shall have no other deities beside Me. You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness, of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I YHWH your deity am an impassioned deity, visiting the guilt of the fathers upon the children, upon the third and fourth generations of those who reject Me, but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep My commandments.	You shall not swear falsely by the name of YHWH your deity; for YHWH will not clear one who swears falsely by His name.
Avot v	Hillel said: Be of the students of Aaron, loving peace, pursuing peace, loving one's fellowmen and drawing them close to the Torah. He also said: He who invokes the Name will lose his name; he who adds not will be taken away; he who studies not deserves death; and he who makes use of the Crown will soon be gone. He also said: If I am not for myself, who will be for me; and if I am only for myself, what am I; and if not now, when? הלל אומר הוי מתלמידיו של אהרן אוהב שלום ורודף שלום אוהב את הבריות ומקרבן לתורה. הוא היה אומר נגד שמא אבד שמה ודלא מוסיף יסוף ודלא יליף קטלא חייב ודאשתמש בתגא חלף. הוא היה אומר אם אין אני לי מי לי וכשאני לעצמי מה אני ואם לא עכשיו אימתי	Shammai said: Make regular your study of the Torah; say little and do much; and greet everyone cheerfully. שמאי אומר עשה תורתך קבע אמור מעט ועשה הרבה והוי מקבל את כל האדם בסבר פנים יפות

At the top of both compositions, Rabbi's parallels are densest. Hillel's first saying speaks of "loving one's fellowmen and drawing them close to the Torah." The first Word speaks of "those who love Me and keep My commandments." Hillel's enigmatic Aramaic saying, "He who invokes the Name will lose his name," נגד שמא אבד שמה, sounds almost like a paraphrase of the second Word: "You shall not swear falsely by the name of YHWH your deity; for YHWH will not clear one who swears falsely by His name." And in Hillel's third saying, unexpectedly, he speaks in the first person, using the first-person pronoun three times. In the first Word, YHWH speaks in the first person, using the pronoun, אנכי, twice.

The structure of Hillel's sayings follows the structure of the first Word. Hillel's first saying, like the first part of the Word, refers to history: Aaron, and "who brought you out of the land of

Egypt.” His third, like the last part of the Word, looks from the present to the future: “if not now, when?” and “to the thousandth generation.” The middle of each is conspicuously unlike its surroundings. Hillel’s first and third sayings are in Hebrew; his middle saying is in Aramaic. YHWH’s first-person declarations enclose three prohibitions in the second person. The frame of the first Word tells us about the nature of YHWH. Its core warns against the things most commonly mistaken for objects of worship. At the core of YHWH’s revelation of Himself stands what is not the deity. The equivalent in Hillel’s sayings may be that Aramaic, a language that is not Hebrew, and pointedly not Greek either, represents what is not Hebrew.

Hillel’s sayings also move through three grammatical persons, second, third and first, as the middle of the first Word does. They refer to three times, the past of Aaron, the present, and the future of “if not now, when?” And Hillel’s first saying has three levels, Aaron, his students, and the people they draw close to the Torah, as the middle of the first Word has three levels, above, on earth and below. Hillel recommends the middle level, the students of Aaron. This is the level we described as “here and now” in the first Word: the “you” who stands before the speaking “I.”

Rabbi used the device of three sayings to teach something else as well. Hillel’s first and third sayings are closely tied to the first Word, and his middle saying to the second. The effect is to declare that the two Words cannot be separated. They are a pair, as the division of the scroll requires and as the rabbinic division denies. It is also worth noting that Hillel’s sayings include a punishment, as both Words do (“visiting the guilt of the fathers,” “YHWH will not clear”), while Shammai’s do not. And the appearance of Aaron in Hillel’s first saying is itself a link to the first Word, which contains the very prohibition that Aaron violated when he made the golden calf.

Hillel’s middle saying, read beside the first Word, describes a path toward the holy in four steps:

Figure 19. Hillel’s Aramaic saying read as four steps toward the holy

Saying	Aramaic	Reading
He who invokes the Name will lose his name	נגד שמא אבד שמה	Link oneself to the holy by means of self-denial
he who adds not will be taken away	ודלא מוסיף יסוף	Add the holy to oneself
he who studies not deserves death	ודלא יליף קטלא חיב	Accustom oneself to the holy
and he who makes use of the Crown will soon be gone	ודאשתמש בתגא חלף	Be a vessel for spreading the holy

It is not by chance that Rabbi made the link at the top of the structure through Hillel, by giving him alone three sayings. Hillel was Rabbi’s ancestor, five generations back, and after Hillel the title nasi became hereditary in his family. By linking his composition to the Decalogue through his own line, Rabbi may be claiming that he received teachings, perhaps teachings about the Decalogue itself, through Hillel, together with the title.

But that is not all that the first person at the top of the two structures says.

Part Four: "If I Am Not for Myself"

Two Readings of One Saying

We have now read Hillel's first-person saying twice, and the two readings seem at first to point in different directions.

In Part Two, reading Avot on its own, the saying was the end of an education. The reader who followed the five Pairs was carried from the householder who drinks in the words of others, to the student who connects, to the judge who examines, to the sage who sees what the others cannot, and finally to the top, where there is room for one. There Hillel speaks in the first person, and the reader is invited to say the words as his or her own: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?"

In Part Three, reading Avot beside the Decalogue, the same saying stood in the place of the first Word. At the top of the Decalogue, YHWH says "I." At the top of the Pairs, Hillel says "I." Rabbi built the parallel with care, in the structure of the sayings, in their language and in their grammar, and he built it through his own ancestor.

The two readings are one reading. Rabbi has set the individual who reaches the top of his composition at the level of the first Word, the place where YHWH speaks. This raises the question that Rabbi's structure forces on any careful reader. What does Rabbi mean by it? Are we to see Hillel as divinely inspired? Or everyone who reaches the fifth level?

What the Decalogue Already Said

The Decalogue itself prepares the answer. Read as a woven text, it does not only descend from YHWH to the self. It also rises, from the inner life of the self, through the person's dealings with others, to YHWH. The tablets in the ark are a place of meeting and speech in both directions.

The first Word says this in its own structure. Its center is a "you" in the here and now, standing before the "I" who speaks. And its last part makes YHWH's future actions depend on what people do: kindness "to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep My commandments." If the Decalogue runs in both directions, then just as YHWH affects people, people affect YHWH. This is the heart of the matter.

The comparison with Avot also shows how the two directions are joined. In the scheme that Rabbi's composition revealed, the self is at one end and YHWH at the other, and between them stands the other person. The fourth set showed the other as the link to the transcendent: the Sabbath kept by and for the whole household, the parents honored, the disciples whose welfare decides whether the Heavenly Name is honored or profaned. The other person is the intermediary between the self and YHWH. That is why the welcome at the top of the Pairs is the welcome of Aaron's students, who love peace within and then love their fellowmen and draw

them close to the Torah, as the high priest entered the Holy of Holies alone and came out again to the people in the courtyard. And it is why Hillel's first-person saying does not stop at the self. Its second clause is "and if I am only for myself, what am I?"

The Wise Man Who Understands Himself

Rabbi left a hint of where this leads, in the one place where the Mishnah speaks directly of esoteric study and the one place where the Pairs appear with their offices. The second chapter of Ḥagigah begins:

One does not expound on forbidden relationships with three, and not on the Act of Creation with two, and not on the Chariot with a single one, unless he was a wise man and understands himself.

The rules narrow from three, to two, to one, as Rabbi's ladder narrowed from many householders to the single reader at the top. And the highest subject is reserved for the one who does not need to be told: the wise man who "understands himself," מבין מדעתו, literally, who understands from his own knowledge. The Talmud explains that such a student is given only "the heads of chapters," ראשי פרקים, and is expected to work out the rest himself (Babylonian Talmud, Ḥagigah 13a). This is the reader that the Pairs were built to produce: the reader who is no longer filled from outside, but who must create his or her own reading of the whole. Immediately after these rules, the Mishnah lists the five Pairs.

Why It Had to Be Esoteric

Nothing in this reading of the Decalogue looks subversive at first. The deity and people can meet; the deity's commands are a ladder; a person who keeps them grows in likeness to the One who gave them. Why, then, was it so closely guarded? Students of esoteric writing have identified such texts as those that express ideas that would undermine an authority able to harm the author if the ideas were stated openly.

The answer lies at the top of the two structures. The esoteric teaching had to be held back at the very point where the realized individual is set parallel to the revealed deity. A teaching that places the individual reader where the Decalogue places "I YHWH," and that charges that reader to create tradition rather than only receive it, moves authority from the chain of office-holders to the reader who understands himself. Hillel and Shammai did not only pass on what they had received. They created the framework of the future. If the process Rabbi embedded in Avot ends in a demand that the reader do the same, it is clear why he embedded the demand so deeply beneath a collection of sensible advice. The beloved little book of sayings is, read from within, a call for the continuous creation of tradition.

This is not a claim that the reader takes the place of the deity. The figure of Aaron, who approaches the holy only by its prescribed method, stands against that reading, and so does the

second half of Hillel's saying. The claim is about responsibility. The one who understands himself can no longer wait to be told.

This is the change that reading the Torah in two ways can make in a person. It is not a doctrine handed over at the end of the analysis. It is what happens to the reader in the course of the analysis. The reader who learns to see the woven text is moved, step by step, from receiving to understanding on his or her own, and then is asked, in the first person, to act on it: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?"

Conclusion: Two Tablets, Two Readings, Both True

The argument so far rests on what can be seen in the two texts. What follows are its implications, as I understand them.

Is the Exoteric Reading False?

Arthur Melzer has usefully summarized the characteristics of esoteric writing.

An esoteric writer or writing would involve the following characteristics: first, the effort to convey certain truths—the “esoteric” teaching—to a select group of individuals by means of some indirect or secretive mode of communication; second, the concomitant effort to withhold or conceal these same truths from most people; and third (a common but not strictly necessary characteristic) the effort to propagate for the sake of the latter group a fictional doctrine—the “exoteric” teaching—in place of the true doctrine that has been withheld.

The first two characteristics fit the Torah, and the Mishnah, well. We have found in both an indirect mode of communication, woven text. According to Rabbi, only a few in each generation had the key to it, and it was guarded so closely that no direct reference to it exists in rabbinic literature. The second characteristic follows from the first. A modern parallel is encryption. Only those with the key can read an encrypted message, and without the key the message is meaningless.

Here the analogy fails. The exoteric Torah is not meaningless. It has been read with profit by millions. Must we then accept Melzer’s third characteristic and call the common reading of the Torah a fiction, Spinoza’s “pious dogmas, such as move the spirit to obedience,” as opposed to “true dogmas,” or Plato’s noble lie? I would like to suggest a fourth possibility in place of the third. The opposition of a true esoteric teaching to a false exoteric one may be a false choice. Both can be true. “You shall not murder” is not a false doctrine. It is necessary for the stability of the community, the many. Woven together with the nine other Words, it becomes part of a composition addressed to the individual. We have no reason to assume that the teaching for the individual contradicts the teaching for the many. The difference between them is the difference between the two sets of tablets: the broken and the whole.

Two Voices

The Torah many times says, “YHWH spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the children of Israel.” The words were spoken twice, once by the deity to Moses, and once by Moses to the people. There are two voices, the deity’s and Moses’. Which voice does the Torah record? Moses spoke as any person speaks, one word after another. The deity is not limited to speaking in a line. I propose that the exoteric, linear reading of the Torah represents the voice of Moses, and the esoteric, woven reading represents the voice of the deity. The Torah contains both. The

Decalogue read as five pairs is a single, integrated, many-sided whole; read as ten separate laws, it bears the limits of human speech, even the speech of Moses.

If the deity speaks in woven text, the deity must also write in woven text, since writing represents speech. That is why the Words were written on two tablets. Each tablet is a column of the weave. The tablets declare that divine speech is not linear and can be grasped only as a weave.

The Broken Tablets and the Whole

The two narratives of the giving of the tablets embody the two readings. The first time, Moses came down the mountain with the tablets in his hands, about to enter the camp and show them to everyone. Because of the golden calf he broke them before he entered, and no one saw the writing. The second time, YHWH told Moses to prepare a box before going up the mountain, and to place the tablets in it as soon as he received them. “And there they are,” Moses says in Deuteronomy, “as YHWH commanded me.” The first tablets were for everyone, and they were shattered, like the linear reading of the Decalogue as ten separate Words. The second tablets were for Moses alone, and they remained whole, like the woven reading. They were placed in the ark in the Holy of Holies, where no one was permitted to see them. Even so, they made possible a continuing dialogue: “There I will meet with you, and I will speak with you from above the ark-cover, from between the two cherubim that are upon the ark of the testimony.”

The Torah confirms this at the center of its own structure. I have shown elsewhere (see the sources below) that Leviticus is composed in three concentric circles of laws that correspond to the three parts of the Tabernacle compound, the courtyard, the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies. At its center, in the place of the ark, stands Leviticus 19. That chapter contains fragments of most of the ten Words, and it is composed of five pairs of components arranged exactly as the Decalogue is arranged in the woven reading. Leviticus 19 holds both the shattered pieces of the first tablets and a whole table of five rows and two columns corresponding to the second. The two-faced character of the Decalogue stands at the structural center of the central book of the Torah. The exoteric and esoteric character of the Torah is part of its overall plan.

The Scroll, the Rabbis and Rabbi

We can now return to the curious fact noted at the beginning of Part One. The Torah scroll divides the Decalogue in a way that leads to the woven reading, and yet no rabbinic writing reads the Decalogue according to the scroll’s division. If the division of the scroll belonged to the esoteric tradition, this is exactly what we should expect. The many received a linear Torah that, like the first tablets, could be read only in fragments. According to Avot, Moses passed the knowledge of the whole to Joshua, and it went on from there to a few in each generation. Philo

and the Rabbis taught that one tablet faced toward the deity and the other toward people. They may have heard that much from their teachers without receiving the key that makes sense of it.

Rabbi seems to have seen himself as one of the last to receive the tradition. Since it was not meant for the public, he needed a way to pass it on to the few. His device reads, on its face, as a popular collection of sayings. Read closely, it is a composition by one author. Read beside the Decalogue in five pairs, it shows that Rabbi knew the woven arrangement of the Words. In one stroke he demonstrated that he possessed the esoteric tradition and gave the careful reader the tools to explore it. That demonstration validated his Mishnah, which preserves two kinds of oral tradition: the laws of earlier generations, collected in its six orders and sixty-three tractates, and the knowledge of the woven Torah, preserved in the structure of its chapters.

This, I believe, is what Rabbi was pointing to when he wrote, “Moses received torah from Sinai and handed it on to Joshua.” And it may be what he meant by the saying that Avot attributes to him: “Do not look at the bottle but at what is in it. You can have a new bottle full of old wine.” The new bottle is the Mishnah. The old wine is the woven Torah.

A Partner in Revelation

The Decalogue is the only text in the Torah presented as written by the deity, and it was written as a weave. The woven form embeds meanings that are not stated in any of its parts. Since none of these meanings is literal, it takes an active reader to assemble them. The reader who does so becomes a partner of the author in revealing what the text contains. Rabbi understood this, and he built a composition that does to its reader what the Decalogue does to its reader: it moves the reader from the house that is filled from outside to the “I” that speaks for itself. The reader becomes, in the words of Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai, a spring that ever flows stronger.

That is the promise of reading the Torah in two ways. Tradition, to be kept alive, must be continually created, and careful reading is the first step in creating it.

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