

Leibniz's Monad and the Talmudic Concept of "Malchut" in *Yoma* 38a-b

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In this paper, we suggest a short comparative study of Leibniz's concept of the monad and the Talmudic idea of "Malchut." Our study is based, specifically, on a tractate of the Talmud titled *Yoma*. This tractate is mainly focused on the Jewish Atonement Day, in which Jews are judged by God for their sins in the previous year. In particular, in pages 38a-b of *Yoma*, the Talmud reads: "By your name they shall call you, and in your place they shall seat you, and from your own they shall give you; No person may touch that which is prepared for another, and one Malchut does not touch another even to the extent of a hairbreadth."¹ The Talmud suggests here that even though we somehow influence one another's life, one cannot directly affect others' predetermined place in the world or interfere in the individual paths prepared for others.

Our aim here is to indicate the similarities between such Talmudic notions and Leibniz's ideas in the *Monadology* – such as the idea that monads have "no windows" and that a pre-established harmony is set among all monads by God – as a ground for future research. We will start by a brief account of the Talmud, and then describe the relevant text in *Yoma* tractate and emphasize its resemblance to Leibniz's ideas.

I

In 586 BC, the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II destroyed the Jewish Holy Temple in Jerusalem and exiled the Jewish people from Judea. When times changed in the Babylonian Empire, the exiles returned to Zion and immediately started rebuilding the Temple. "The Second Temple" had been standing for almost 600 years, until its destruction by the Romans in 70 AD. To suppress the Great Rebellion of the Jews against the Roman regime of Judea, Titus, the son of the Roman emperor Vespasian, knowing the significance of the Temple for the Jews, led his troops to Jerusalem to destroy the Temple.

The destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman forces was devastating, and the Jewish people almost became extinct. However, in the face of annihilation, a group of Jewish scholars decided that it was time to write down the religious lore that for centuries had been accumulated

¹ Talmud, *Yoma*, pp. 38a-b.

and orally passed from one generation to another. These were the circumstances in which the Mishna, the written Oral Torah, was born.

Writing the Mishna was not an easy decision, since the Torah should have remained the single holy scripture and nothing was supposed to overshadow it. Accordingly, the word Mishna has two complementary meanings in Hebrew: it is secondary to the Torah, and it also means memorization of knowledge. Moreover, oral traditions naturally tend to develop into different versions, thus such disunity might endanger the cohesion of the Jewish people. So in order to prevent any divisions, the Mishna vividly documented the controversies in which various Rabbis were engaged at that time. The Talmud was the first interpretation of the Mishna, dating from the 3rd century AD.

II

Leibniz's interest in the Talmud and in Jewish philosophy and theology in general, is well established in the scholarly literature. Specifically, Allison Coudert wrote extensively on the Kabbalah and the Monads;² T. Stearns Eliot, while describing in detail the development of Leibniz's monadism, notes that Bossuet sent to Leibniz a translation of the Talmud;³ and Marcelo Dascal highlights the convergence of Leibniz's principles of rationality and Talmudic dialectics.⁴ Contemporary Leibniz scholars, such as Mogens Laerke, maintain an interest in Leibniz's thought on religious Jewish writings.⁵

Nevertheless, our claim here is rather modest. While reading the Talmud, we encountered the concept of Malchut and noticed a conceptual resemblance to Leibniz's idea of the monad. Specifically, several ideas on pages 38a-b of the Talmudic tractate *Yoma* bear strong similarities to Leibniz's teachings that monads have "no windows" and that a pre-established harmony is set among all monads by God. Now we do not claim that Leibniz read page 38 of *Yoma* tractate or that he was influenced by it while writing the *Monadology*. Yet we find it worthwhile to explore this resemblance as a ground for future research.

² Allison P. Coudert: *Leibniz and the Kabbalah*, Dordrecht 1995.

³ T. Stearns Eliot: "The Development of Leibniz's Monadism", in: *The Monist* 26/4 (1916), pp. 534-536.

⁴ Marcelo Dascal: *A crua palavra: Conversation with Marcelo Dascal*, ed. by Giovanni Scarafie, New York 2011. See also: Rodica Amel: "Marcelo Dascal and the Dialectics of Epistemological Philosophy", in: *Philosophy Study* 11/4 (2021), pp. 287-292.

⁵ Mogens Laerke: "Three Texts on the Kabbalah: More, Wachter, Leibniz, and the Philosophy of the Hebrews", in: *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 25/5 (2017), pp.1011-1030.

III

Let us consider now the content of page 38 of *Yoma*. It tells the story of two families that were in charge of two sacred secrets essential to priestly liturgy in the Temple. One family knew how to make the showbread that consisted of twelve cakes that were left on a special table in the Temple every Saturday. These cakes had to stay fresh throughout the week as if they were just taken out of the oven, and the bakers kept their knowledge within the family for generations. The members of the other family were experts in the technique of preparing the incense offering. The incense was made of a special mixture of aromatic herbs, which released strong perfumed smoke in the Temple when it was kindled. This important component of priestly liturgy had to be burned in a way that made the smoke rise in a straight column like a stick, and no one besides the members of this family knew how to do it.

Other priests in the Temple asked the families to share their secrets, but they refused. Consequently, the expert families were dismissed, and substitute craftsmen were summoned to replace them. Yet no one knew how to properly bake showbread, so that it would not become moldy during the weekdays, and no one knew how to cause the smoke of the incense offering to rise in a straight column. Having no choice, the priests sought to reinstate the families to their original positions in the Temple. The families agreed, but only after their salaries were doubled.

The baffled priests asked the families why they refused to share their secrets. The family members answered that their forefathers had prophesied that one day the Temple would be destroyed, so they were worried that the sacred secrets would fall into the hands of idolaters who would use them for pagan worship. That was reason they did not use their expertise in daily matters: the bakers never ate refined bread, so that people would not say that they used the secret entrusted to them for their own benefit; similarly, the women of the other family never put on perfume to smell nicely, so that people would not say that they use the secret entrusted to them for their own enjoyment.

IV

The moral of this story and its relation to the idea of Malchut, and by analogy to the concept of the monad, are encapsulated in the following concluding statement of the episode in *Yoma*:

“By your name they shall call you, and in your place they shall seat you,
and from your own they shall give you; No person may touch that which

is prepared for another, and one Malchut does not touch another even to the extent of a hairbreadth.” (Talmud, *Yoma*, pp. 38a-b)

Let us begin with the last sentence. The word Malchut in Hebrew means reign or kingdom. The Talmud explains here that the two families should not worry about what will happen if the Temple is destroyed and an idolater King comes to power, for there are no causal relations between one reign and the one that follows it – they do not interfere with one another even “to the extent of a hairbreadth.” Using Leibniz’s words from section 7 of the *Monadology*, we would say that a Malchut has no windows.

Thus, if Malchut or a kingdom does not affect and is not affected by any other, we can say that it “can only begin or end all at once, that is, [it] cannot begin except by creation or end except by annihilation” (*Monadology* §6).⁶ Accordingly, the Talmud recounts in *Shabbat* tractate the death of King David in a similar fashion. when God tells King David that he will die during the coming Saturday, David asks Him to live for one more day so that his death will not dishonor the holy day of Shabbat. God answers that “the kingdom of your son Solomon has already arrived, and one kingdom does not overlap with another even to the extent of a hairbreadth.”⁷

Now the concept of Malchut has another meaning, associated with the idea of internal order or inner principle of development and progression. The Talmud considers every particular life of each and every human being, as a kingdom or Malchut⁸ – in Leibniz’s terms a *monad*. Indeed, the Talmudic statement that “no person may touch that which is prepared for another” corresponds to Leibniz’s claim in section 7 of the *Monadology*: “There is... no way of explaining how a monad can be altered or changed internally by any other creature.” That is, like a monad, each person comes into the world as a creation and ends their time in the annihilation of death, and in between evolves according to an inner logic of development.

Even though it appears that the various life paths of different persons are inextricably intertwined, in reality they do not. This appearance is not accidental, but rather the outcome of a grand design. In other words, a pre-established harmony exists between each and every Malchut, as is clear from the Talmudic saying: “By your name they shall call you, and in your place they shall seat you, and from your own they shall give you.” Namely, one’s function in the world and

⁶ English translations of the *Monadology* are taken from G.W. Leibniz: *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, 2nd Ed., ed. and trans. by L.E. Loemker, Dordrecht 1969.

⁷ Talmud, *Shabbat*, p. 30.

⁸ Talmud, *Baba Metzia*, p. 113.

one's livelihood are determined in advance. One's profession is one's vocation – a person will be called by their specific name and be seated in the exact position designed to them.

The two above-mentioned families had specific functions in the world. When they were discharged from the duties in Temple, they knew that they had no other place in which they could make a living from their expertise. Yet the families were reluctant to return to their positions, until their salaries were doubled. Nevertheless, the Talmud clarifies that this is not to interpreted as exploitation of guild power on the part of the families. The saying “from your own they shall give you” means that the families did not get nothing that was not theirs. There was no actual transfer between sides, in which one gained and the other lost. The families received what was allocated for them, and the priests, on the other hand, did not lose any of *their* money but rather learned the lesson of respecting the duties of decent persons in the worship of God.

Finally, there is a partial resemblance between Leibniz's version of determinism, which involves *contingency* instead of logical necessity, and the Talmudic determinism.⁹ Although a person's place in the world and livelihood are determined, these are not entirely necessary: the way a person approaches their vocation is at their discretion. The families in the story of *Yoma*, for example, treated the duties with dignity and humility. They acted on the basis of ethical considerations, and not according to selfish ones. They were praised for strictly utilizing their secret expertise for religious rituals, and not for personal benefits. By assuming a worthy attitude to their vocation, a person may indirectly affect their course of life. For according to the Jewish faith, and unlike Leibniz's harmony which is pre-established once and for all, on the Day of Atonement, *Yom Kippur*, God reconsiders the life paths of each Malchut based on their conduct in the previous year, and accordingly re-establishes the harmony between them.

V

To conclude, we suggest that a comparative study of Leibniz's idea of the monad and the Talmudic concept of Malchut may be an interesting direction for further research. Our short study here is based on the *Yoma* tractate of the Talmud, yet the word Malchut can be found in numerous places in the Jewish texts. We have indicated the correspondence between certain meanings of the word Malchut and some of Leibniz's ideas about the monads. In particular, we have

⁹ We elaborate on Leibniz's views on determinism and contingency, in Idan Shimony and Yekutieli Shoham: “Locke and Leibniz on Freedom and Necessity”, in: Wenchao Li et al. (eds), *Für unser Glück oder das Glück anderer*, Hildesheim 2016, vol. 1, pp. 573-588.

emphasized how Leibniz's views of windowless monads and preestablished harmony are reflected in the Talmudic text.