Divine justice demands divine retribution. The more heinous the sin, the harsher the punishment. Though not the only explanation for evil and suffering offered in classical Jewish religious literature, divine retribution is certainly the most persistent and dominant one.¹ For example, as the familiar liturgical refrain reminds us, "because of our sins, we were exiled from our land."

One of the most heinous sins, according to the Pentateuch, is incest. Leviticus 18, traditionally read on the afternoon of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, delineates laws against incest. Incest with a person of one's own flesh, i.e., a close family member, is forbidden (Lev. 18:6).² This includes, for example, a daughter-in-law (Lev. 18:15), for which the punishment is death (Lev. 20:12).³ Leviticus 18 designates extirpation (karet) as the punishment for such acts of sexual impropriety. This text further states that such sins led to the defilement of the land by the Canaanites, and consequently to their being cast out of the land. The Israelites are warned that they will inevitably share the fate of the Canaanites should they perpetuate such practices. Here, as elsewhere, immoral acts have consequences that affect the natural as well as the social realm (see, e.g., Lev. 26:14-17, 20). The prophet Ezekiel identifies incest as one of the sins that brought about the destruction of the first Jewish Commonwealth and the First Temple, with the subsequent exile to Babylonia during his own lifetime (Ezek. 22:10-11, 15, 31).

According to the rabbis, incest and adultery are among the first sins prohibited to humankind, being instituted as a result of Eve's offense.⁴ Prohibitions against committing these sins are also listed among the "Seven Commandments of the Sons of Noah."⁵ In addition, the rabbis count such sins among those for which a person must surrender his life rather than transgress.⁶ According to the rabbis, incest is a pre-Sinaitic prohibition both for Israelites and non-Israelites.⁷

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The two most prominent accounts of incest in the Pentateuch are those of Lot and his daughters (Gen. 19:30-38) and of Judah and his daughter-in-law, Tamar (Gen. 38). Since Tamar is technically married to Judah's youngest son according to the levirate laws (see Deut. 25:5-6), the union of Judah and Tamar might be considered an act of adultery as well as incest. Whatever the case, throughout the text Tamar is consistently identified as Judah's daughter-in-law (Gen. 38:16, 24), and a sexual liaison between father-in-law and daughter-in-law is clearly an example of incest (Lev. 18:15). When Tamar is discovered to be pregnant, Judah orders her to be executed by fire, apparently for having committed the sin of adultery as well as harlotry. However, after Tamar proves that Judah himself is the father, he commutes her sentence and accepts responsibility for her desperate action, which only became necessary because he had withheld his remaining son Shelah from her, thereby violating the legal requirement that Shelah consummate sexual relations with Tamar as a levirate husband (Gen. 38:26).

Despite the strong biblical admonitions against incest, and despite the severe punishments one might expect to be inflicted on those who committed this sin, no punishment – human or divine – for incest is visited either upon Judah or Tamar, or upon Lot and his daughters. In fact, rather than punishment for Judah and Tamar or for Lot and his daughters, we find an altogether different outcome, one which is redemptive rather than punitive. Instead of foreshadowing eventual catastrophe, these actions surprisingly ensure redemption, i.e., messianic redemption.

One of the offspring of the incestuous relationship between Lot and his daughter is Moab. One of Moab's descendants is Ruth who, despite casting her lot with the Israelites, is still called Ruth the Moabite (Ruth 1:22, 4:5, 10). One of Ruth's descendants is King David (Ruth 4:17-22), who is, in turn, the ancestor of the expected Messiah. Hence, a descendent of Moab, whose ancestors are excluded from admission into the congregation of the Lord (Deut. 23:4), i.e., the people of Israel, is nonetheless destined to be the Jewish messiah. A descendant not only of Gentiles, not only of an ostracized people, but also of an incestuous relationship, is designated as the ultimate redeemer, the Messiah son of David. A sinful, catastrophic act, surprisingly bears not punitive but redemptive consequences. This is also the result in the case of Judah and Tamar.
A son of the incestuous relationship between Judah and Tamar is Peretz (Gen. 38:29). Both Tamar and her husbands, Judah's sons, are descendants of Canaanites. As the Book of Ruth (4:18) reminds us, King David is a descendant of Peretz. David, in turn, is the ancestor of the Messiah. Indeed, as the Sabbath hymn Lekhah Dodi declares each week, we shall be redeemed by a descendant of Peretz (ben Partzi). Moreover, the Book of Ruth (4:18) further informs us that Ruth's husband, Boaz, the father of their son Obed, is a descendant of Peretz. Hence, David's (and the Messiah's) ancestor, Obed, is a descendant of both Moab and of Peretz, each of them products of an incestuous relationship. It may further be noted that the New Testament (Matthew 1), in its genealogy of Jesus, whom Christians regard as the Messiah, not only lists Judah and Tamar and Boaz and Ruth among his forebears, but also identifies Rahab the prostitute (Josh. 2:1) as the mother of Boaz, and Bathsheba, the mother of King Solomon who committed adultery with King David, as being among the ancestors of the Messiah. Note, here too, the genealogical presence of women who participated in dubious moral activities.

Although one might expect some type of punishment for these sins of incest, none is inflicted, not even in eschatological times. Instead, the advent of the messianic era is symbolized by the arrival of a descendant of the two most notorious cases of incestuous transgression in the Pentateuch. Here, we do not have an example of divine retribution, but rather of what Gershom Scholem called "redemption through sin." It might be argued that no punishment was inflicted because there were "mitigating circumstances" in each of these two cases. In the case of Lot and his daughters, Lot was presumably so inebriated that he was unaware of what he had done (Gen. 19:32-35). After the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, his daughters apparently believed that they and their father were the only surviving human beings in the world and that mankind would perish unless they conceived progeny through their own father (Gen. 19:31). That perception of their situation evidently made them believe that their extraordinary actions were justified and necessary so as to ensure the bloodline of the human species. In the case of Judah and Tamar, Judah was initially unaware that he had slept with his daughter-in-law and he did not intentionally do so, while Tamar's action was later recognized under the circumstances by Judah himself as having been justified (Gen. 38:26) in order to ensure the bloodline
of his own family. Undoubtedly, these mitigating circumstances could lead one to contend that the sin was not as heinous as one might presume. Indeed, the rabbis debated whether the action was inspired by an immoral or a noble motive, yet none of the rabbis could deny that an act of incest actually occurred.\textsuperscript{14} Nonetheless, a major leap is required to go from limiting the liability of these participants in a heinous sin, because of "mitigating circumstances," to perceiving their acts as redemptive in nature.

Yet that is exactly what a peculiar, obscure tradition claims insofar as Judah and Tamar are concerned. Though acknowledging that an act of incest had indeed occurred, this tradition frees both Judah and Tamar from responsibility, claiming that God's desire to ensure the future messianic redemption somehow required them to mate, that their offense was somehow part of a surreptitious divine plan. According to a midrashic text, Judah had neither the intention nor the inclination to have sexual relations with Tamar; but God ordered the "angel of desire" to convince Judah that unless he mated with Tamar, the future redeemer would not arise. Consequently, Judah had sexual relations with Tamar "in spite of himself and against his own wishes," to ensure the future messianic redemption.\textsuperscript{15} And another, later midrash adds that neither Judah nor Tamar wanted to have sexual relations with each other: they did so only because a divine revelation informed them that the Messiah would eventually issue from their union.\textsuperscript{16} Hence, for some mysterious divine reason, this act of incest, harlotry and possible adultery had to occur to ensure the future messianic redemption. Here we have a prime example of what Kierkegaard might have called "the teleological suspension of the ethical."

The doctrine of "redemption through sin" is usually identified with the seventeenth-century followers of the pseudo-messiah Shabbatai Zevi and with those eighteenth-century offspring of Shabbateanism, the Frankists. However, as the foregoing account shows, the notion of redemption through sin may be readily adduced from reflecting upon these two notable cases of incest in the Pentateuch and their final awaited outcome, the messianic redemption.

It is evident, as Scholem and others have demonstrated, that the doctrine of redemption through sin became a cornerstone of Shabbatean teaching. This was especially the case with regard to sexual offenses such as incest. Indeed, Jacob Frank was said to have committed incest with his daughter as part of a Frankist ritual. As Scholem notes in his presentation of the teachings of the
leading Shabbatean "prophet," Nathan of Gaza: "The touchstone of all antinomian theories is the delicate subject of sexual morality . . . even the biblical laws of incest – symbolizing the restraints of sexual morality – lose their unconditional validity. The laws of incest were imposed upon Adam in this lower world, but in the higher world of *Atzilut* 'there is no incest.' As long as incest taboos are in force here on earth, 'it is impossible to perform the unifications above'; in the mystical suspension of the laws of incest, man will become 'like his creator in the mystery of the Tree of Life.'"

Nathan of Gaza was undoubtedly influenced by the earlier view of *Tikkunei ha-Zohar* which taught that "Above, there are no laws of incest." According to this view, the more spiritual version of Torah than the version we have on earth, the supernal Torah in the heavenly realm of *Atzilut* (i.e., the divine world of the *Sefirot*), knows not of the laws of incest. As a result, some claim that when justified, one may act in accordance with the Torah of that exalted dimension of spiritual existence. Such a justification would be to ensure messianic redemption.

In *Or Yakar*, Moses Cordevero's commentary on the *Zohar*, with specific reference to Lot and his daughter and to Judah and Tamar, Cordevero claims that from the sin of Adam onward, the only way to return tainted souls from the impure realm to the realm of the holy is through sin – in their case, through the sin of incest. Messianic redemption, among other things, requires redemption from sin. For Cordevero, sometimes only sin can neutralize sin. For example, the sin of incest can neutralize previous sins, including incest, and can paradoxically accelerate through sin the advent of redemption. According to Cordevero and other kabbalists, the Messiah must have some relationship with evil, heinous sin, the Gentile realm, and the demonic to be capable of ultimately defeating them. God paradoxically utilizes evil and sin to redeem the world from evil and sin.

The messianic idea in Judaism is not monolithic. It is a sea of ideas with many streams and tributaries. The biblical episodes discussed above, and their reverberation in later Jewish religious literature, may not represent dominant motives of Jewish messianism, but they nevertheless articulate insights that are found within the enormous corpus of teachings about the messianic idea in Judaism. What is suggested here is that these largely post-biblical
motives are anchored in these biblical texts. Let us consider some such motives:

1. Although much of Jewish messianism focuses on the national redemption of the people of Israel and the eventual triumph of Israel over its Gentile oppressors, there is also an expectation that the messianic advent will initiate the redemption of all humankind. While the idea of universal messianic redemption is stressed in Christian teachings, it is far from absent in Jewish messianic speculation, where the onset of the messianic age restores the human condition to the idyllic state it enjoyed before the sins of the parents of all humankind, Adam and Eve. Consequently, the genealogy of the Messiah, who comes to redeem both the people of Israel and the Gentiles, must include both Jewish and non-Jewish forebears. The biblical narratives discussed above document the Jewish and Gentile genealogical origins of the expected redeemer.

2. Jewish messianism is largely androcentric. Most past human agents of a national redemption like Moses, as well as the expected final messiah, are men. As these biblical narratives seem to be inserting a Gentile genealogical element into the messianic drama, so do they also seem to be incorporating a proactive female role into the process of redemption.

3. As both biblical narratives under discussion, as well as the rabbinic lens of interpretation upon them claim, divine providence sometimes operates implicitly, initiating results that are not readily apparent either to the participants in events or to the readers of the biblical accounts of those events. For example, as Joseph reminds his brothers, their sinful and cruel acts toward him were actually part of an implicit redemptive divine purpose (Gen. 45:5). So too, in the texts under discussion here, sinful actions engender a redemptive event. Similarly, the rabbis point out that God's name is not mentioned explicitly in the Book of Esther because both God and this female redeemer of her people (i.e., Esther), act implicitly and surreptitiously to effect redemption. Here, too, "divine cunning" works surreptitiously and mysteriously to engender a redemptive result.

4. In various strands of Jewish messianic thinking, especially apocalyptic ones, catastrophe is thought to be a prerequisite for ultimate redemption. Without sin, there is no need either for repentance or redemption. Many rabbinic and medieval texts describe "the birth pangs of the Messiah," where
brutal war, abject national defeat, natural catastrophe, grave social strife and political anarchy are the necessary prelude to the messianic age that will be characterized by unprecedented peace, prosperity, intellectual enlightenment, political stability, social harmony, an end to strife among the forces of nature, and restored Jewish national sovereignty. Here, too, catastrophe serves as a necessary prelude to redemption.\textsuperscript{22}

5. Finally, these texts remind us that sometimes not only the heroic deeds of individuals, but even individual moral misdeeds can have a redemptive function on the national and also on the universal level. One might even suggest that when performed with noble intentions, like preserving the bloodline of one’s family or of humankind itself, sinful actions in response to extreme situations may ultimately retroactively prove both justified and redemptive. Indeed, as Judah comes to realize, although Tamar initially appeared to be in the wrong, she ultimately proved to be in the right (see Gen. 38:26). Furthermore, as we have already noted, Judah and his brothers were soon to discover that God sometimes surreptitiously employs human sin to engender redemptive results.

NOTES
2. Note that incest with one’s daughter is not specifically listed among the prohibitions against incest, including Lev. 18. However, it seems to be implied in Lev. 18:6 by the term \textit{of your own flesh}. Furthermore, although incest of a parent initiated against his/her child does not seem explicitly stated, incest of a child initiated against his/her parent is explicit in Lev. 18:7 – the latter of which seems to be relevant to the case of Lot’s daughters.
3. According to Mishnah \textit{Sanhedrin} 7:4, the penalty is death by stoning.
4. See \textit{Genesis Rabbah} 16:6; \textit{Deuteronomy Rabbah} 2:25. \textit{Gilluy arayot} is taken to mean acts of sexual impropriety, and usually refers specifically to incest and adultery.
5. See TB \textit{Sanhedrin} 56a; \textit{Genesis Rabbah} 34:19.
6. TB \textit{Sanhedrin} 74a.
7. That the rabbis include incest in the Noachide covenant means that the prohibition against incest is pre-Sinaitic and binding on both Jews and non-Jews. \textit{Sifra} on Lev. 18:7, which specifically forbids sexual relations between a child and his/her parent, notes that the prohibitions against incest include non-Israelites; see \textit{Sifra, Aharei Mot}, chap. 13, beginning (New York: Ohm, 1947), p. 85b.
8. As stated in the preceding note, the rabbis considered the prohibition against incest to be pre-Sinaitic. So, apparently, was the institution of levirate marriage. It therefore seems singularly ironic that a midrashic tradition identifies Judah as the first person to practice levirate marriage.
when he commands his second son to perform it after the death of his oldest son, Tamar's first husband (Gen. 38:8); see *Genesis Rabbah* 85:5.


10. See *Genesis Rabbah* 51:8. Note also the ancient tradition of reading the story of Lot and his daughters each Sabbath; see *Genesis Rabbah* 51:9.

11. As might be expected, the rabbis identify both Tamar (TB *Sotah* 10a) and Judah's Canaanite wife (*Targum Yerushalmi* on Gen. 38:3) as converts to Judaism. Ruth the Moabite is, of course, a famous paradigm for converts in Jewish tradition.


14. In the Midrash this debate involves the actions of Lot and his daughters. The view that the motives were noble is extended to Moab's descendants, including Ruth; see *Genesis Rabbah* 51:10.


16. *Midrash ha-Gadol – Bereshit*, ed. M. Margaliot (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1947), "Va-yeshev," p. 655. On this text, see for example S. Lieberman, *Sheki'in* (Jerusalem: Wahrman, 1970), p. 5. Both traditions of *Genesis Rabbah* and *Midrash ha-Gadol* are noted by Nahmanides at the end of the introduction to his commentary on Job: see *Kitvei Rabbenu Moshe ben Nahman*, vol. 1, ed. C. Chavel (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1963), p. 36. This tradition, although with some kabbalistic embellishment, is discussed by the eighteenth-century Hasidic master, Kalonymus Kalman Epstein of Krakow, in his *Ma'or va-Shemesh* (1842; Jerusalem: Even Yisrael, 1992), vol. 1, pp. 103-4. Here, on p. 102, he also discusses Lot and notes the ancient custom, cited above, of reading the story of Lot each Sabbath. For Epstein, it is clear that acts of incest, i.e., Lot and Judah, were necessary to ensure messianic redemption and to provoke the downward flow of the redemptive divine force (shefa) from the supernal worlds. Like Nathan of Gaza, Epstein suggests that incest can stimulate "unifications" in the realm of the *Sefirot*.

17. G. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 810. A major feature of Shabbatean teaching with regard to "redemption through sin" is to consider sins as permitted, even mandatory actions. In a sense, the biblical institution of levirate marriage does precisely that. For example, Lev. 18:16 prohibits sexual relations with one's sister-in-law as incest, yet levirate marriage obligates such relations. However, if *halitzah* is performed, this sexual act again becomes prohibited, although the brother-in-law is humiliated for not having sexual relations with his sister-in-law (Deut. 25:5-10). See also *Genesis Rabbah* 85:5.

18. *Tikkunei ha-Zohar* (Vilna, 1867), no. 69, beginning. The example of incest with a daughter-in-law is specifically mentioned in this text.


21. On the descendant of Peretz, i.e., the Messiah, restoring the world to the condition it enjoyed before Adam's sin, see for example *Genesis Rabbah* 12:6.