New Voices in Jewish-American Literature

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NEW VOICES IN JEWISH-AMERICAN LITERATURE

'But Yehoshuah knew the numbers': Reading Joshua Cohen's *Book of Numbers* as Biblical Adaptation

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This article considers Joshua Cohen's 2015 *Book of Numbers* as an adaptation of the biblical Numbers. Drawing on personal interviews and Cohen's novel, I trace how Cohen uses the structures and themes of the biblical Numbers to write about the contemporary technological world. By recasting the biblical source into a technological form, Cohen suggests that the digital world offers a kind of freedom, a Promised Land; yet, the freedom of the internet and new technologies is ultimately enslaving, resulting in an alienation of the self. Still, the 2015 *Book of Numbers* has a hopeful outlook, anticipating the survival of the 'younger generation'.

Article

The last decade has witnessed several high profile, big-budget biblical adaptations, ranging from various genres, forms, and approaches. For example, in 2004 Mel Gibson directed *The Passion of the Christ* and, in 2014, Darren Aronofsky directed *Noah*. A recent development in biblical adaptation is the genre of televised mini-series. 2006 brought *The Ten Commandments* miniseries, and 2013 gave birth to *The Bible* miniseries, which resulted in the 2015 miniseries sequel *A.D.: The Bible Continues*. Likewise, Joshua Cohen's 2015 novel *Book of Numbers* adapts the fourth book of the Pentateuch but recasts the biblical wilderness into the technological world of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. In Cohen's novel, we find a writer called Joshua Cohen, who ghostwrites for a different Joshua Cohen (whom the novel generally refers to as Principal), the founder and CEO of Tetration, a Google-esque company.[1] In addition to Joshua, we find other names from Deuteronomy: Aaron, Miriam, Moe (for Moses), and Kori (for Korach). In case the names that Cohen uses are not enough evidence for his indebtedness to the biblical book, the novel's epigraph consists of a King James translation of Numbers 14:32–34, as well as an alleged translation by 'TETRANS.TETRATION.COM/#HEBREW/ENGLISH', the novel's equivalent of Google Translate (Cohen, 2015a: 3). Cohen's frequent biblical allusions and quotations make it clear that Numbers is one of his primary sources, and his frequent references demand that readers notice the biblical weight behind his novel.

Cohen's retelling of the Numbers narrative arguably speaks to the nearly universal attempt to recast and understand religious and cultural myths within a contemporary context. More specifically, however, the impulse to retell the Hebrew Scriptures seems to be central to the Jewish American cultural experience. Jonathan Safran Foer, another Jewish American writer, argues that the Haggadah, a Jewish text that sets forth the order of the Passover Seder, is more than just a written instructional guide, claiming:

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[1] Cohen's layering of the different Joshuas—from the real writer to the fictional writer to the CEO—creates an intended sense of confusion and ambiguity throughout his novel. To avoid such confusion in this article, I will refer to the real writer as Cohen, the fictional writer as Joshua, and the CEO as Principal.

Though it means "the telling", the Haggadah does not merely tell a story: it is our book of living memory. It is not enough to retell the story: we must make the most radical leap of empathy into it. "In every generation a person is obligated to view himself as if he were the one who went out of Egypt", the Haggadah tells us. (Foer, 2012: n. pag.).

Cohen, too, recounts the move out of Egypt into the wilderness and 'make[s] the most radical leap of empathy into it' as he envisions the narrative unfolding within his contemporary technological and postmodern world.

Within Cohen's novel, Joshua speaks directly to this impulse to read one's own situation as reflective of the same experiences found within Biblical texts or narratives. Joshua believes the reason that his failing marriage has survived so long depends on 'that unshakable Jew belief in continuity, narrative, plot…to commiserate through recitation: the flight into Egypt, plagues, flight out of Egypt, desert, and plagues—a travail so repeated without manumission that it becomes its own travail, and that tradition is earned' (Cohen, 2015a: 39). Joshua sees his personal life as an acting out or a recitation of a religious narrative, that of survival and continuity. At times, Joshua's viewing of his marriage from a biblical lens is clearly misogynistic.[2] For example, Joshua states: 'All men are Arameans, whoever they are, and we commemorate our enslavement to our female taskmasters and their mothers—our mothers—not just two nights a year, but daily. L'chaim' (Cohen, 2015a: 39). Despite Joshua's blatant misogyny, this statement speaks to Joshua's—and Cohen's—reading of contemporary life within a biblical narrative or framework.

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[2] Joshua's comment is one of many troubling and problematic misogynist comments throughout the novel. I re-emphasize that the misogyny belongs to the character Joshua, not the novelist Cohen. In several interviews, Cohen distances himself from the character Joshua. In Ben Bush's interview, Cohen casts the novel's racist and misogynistic rhetoric in terms of the internet: 'There is this idea that the internet is an unparalleled communication device, a vast library, a global culture—when, of course, it is really a cesspool of porn and rage and race-baiting and the worst sorts of misogynistic and racist rhetoric' (Cohen, 2015e: n. pag.).

 Focusing on Cohen's Jewish heritage, this article will approach the novel as an adaptation of the biblical Numbers.[3] As such, I use Cohen's novel and personal interviews to trace how Cohen uses the structures and themes of the biblical Numbers to write about the contemporary world.[4] Through recasting the biblical source into a technological form, Cohen warns that the digital world offers both freedom and enslavement: on the one hand, it offers a Promised Land; on the other hand, the freedom of the internet and new technologies is enslaving, resulting in an alienation of the self. The end of the novel negotiates these extremes of freedom and enslavement by optimistically anticipating the survival of the 'younger generation'. My interest in Cohen's appropriation and recasting of biblical narrative follows recent critical interest in religion and literature, particularly in how contemporary writers understand, adapt, and recast religious texts in an attempt to re-orient themselves in the modern world. Certainly, the study of writers and their use of religious texts has a long history, far before the twentieth century, but, more recently, Northrop Frye's contributions to the fields of religion and literature have renewed literary interest in religious myth and imagination. Frye, calling critics to take the Bible and its cultural legacy seriously, asserts: 'The Bible is clearly a major element in our imaginative tradition, whatever we may think we believe about it…It seems to me that someone not a specialist in the Biblical field needs to call attention to the Bible's existence and relevance' (Frye, 1982: xviii–xix). My study of Cohen's novel and its relation to the biblical narrative is one such attempt to think critically about the Bible's influence on imagination.

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[3] While Judaism is my primary focus in this analysis, it is only one of many religious traditions that the novel engages. For example, Cohen's novel engages Buddhism: 'The execs were talking Gautama Buddha and the differences between renunciation and moderation but as like they related to diet and exercise, the middle of the Middle Way. The affinities between Buddhism and capitalism' (Cohen, 2015a: 371); Islam: 'But then another window opened, to shut my own--the prayer of Fajr. There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is His slayer of bones' (Cohen, 2015a: 142); Hinduism: 'Anyway, Moe concluded his holiday fast as like he always did, with a japa prayer to Vishnu, Krishna, Devki, Devkikrishna, and froyo' (Cohen, 2015a: 322); Christianity: '*Ha lachma anya*. This is the bread of affliction. *Eli Eli lama shavaktani*? Father, Father, why didn't Christ quote the Psalms in Hebrew--was he that inept, or does excruciation always call for the vernacular?' (Cohen, 2015a: 40).

[4] For a discussion about his early and extensive Jewish education and the biblical book of Numbers as a reference point, see Cohen's interview 'The Book Show #1416-Joshua Cohen' (Cohen, 2016).

This article offers a unique scholarly contribution to the examination of how contemporary novelists approach and recast religious texts. As such, it represents one of the first critical studies of Cohen's fiction, specifically of the *Book of Numbers*. To date, only three critical studies on Cohen's fiction exist: Marcin Stawiarski's 2010 article on the 'musicalization of fiction' in Cohen's and others' works, Stawiarski's 2013 article on the relationship between disembodiment and music in Cohen's *Cadenza for the Schneidermann Violin Concerto*, and most recently, Paul Scott Stanfield's 2016 essay on Cohen's Judaism and his fiction.[5] This article will therefore seek to expand the critical conversation started by Stawiarski and Stanfield about Cohen's fiction.

Structure and Compilation

Before examining the thematic similarities between the biblical Numbers and Cohen's novel, I will briefly consider their similar forms. As a postmodern novel, Cohen's work is a compilation of multiple genres, both real and fictional. The novel uses images of clay 'jar girls' (Cohen, 2015a: 50), footnotes (120), computer codes and equations (191), interviews (284), and emails (450). Additionally, the novel moves between multiple speakers and voices. The narrative opens with Joshua's direct second-person engagement with readers, telling them to 'fuck off' if they are reading the electronic version of the book (Cohen, 2015a: 1). The book then moves into Joshua's personal narrative: 'I responded to an ad posted by an ad agency' (Cohen, 2015a: 33). Later, the novel moves between Joshua's narrative, Principal's personal narrative within his interview, and Joshua's attempts to present a biographical rendering of Principal's narrative.

In part, the mixed-genre of *Book of Numbers* is the result of Cohen's postmodern project, one that is clearly indebted to the works of Thomas Pynchon and David Foster Wallace; yet, Cohen's book is more than just a postmodern experiment, and its variety of genres and authors speaks as much to its biblical legacy as its postmodern

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[5] Cohen's previous novels were published by small presses; *Book of Numbers* was published with Random House. Given this publisher and the widespread reception of the novel, I anticipate others will soon critically engage this novel.

legacy. As I will soon demonstrate, the biblical account is just as heterogeneous as Cohen's adaptation.

While the traditional view holds that Moses wrote a unified narrative of Numbers, critical scholarship, especially higher criticism growing out of Julius Wellhausen's nineteenth-century work, has long called this claim into question (see Wellhausen [1889]). The historiography of higher criticism and the documentary hypothesis is too lengthy to trace in this article, but a few comments specific to Numbers will be helpful. First, most scholars, although not all, have agreed that the biblical Numbers is a compilation of multiple sources and genres, and while scholars have not reached a universal agreement about which parts of the text belong to which sources, they agree that the received text today is the result of a long history of compilation and redaction. Timothy Ashley, believing a compromise between traditional and higher criticism is necessary, suggests:

> On the one hand, the traditional theory affirms the many and basic unifying features of the book, which are anchored in the person of Moses. It seems too difficult to deny his role in the origin of the book. On the other hand, a great deal of evidence suggests a long period of transmission for some materials in the book. Most of the book presupposes a time later than the conquest, and particularly materials from ch. 22 on point to time significantly later. (Ashley, 1993: 6–7)

According to Ashley and other critics, Numbers has a relatively unified structure that points back to a single source, but some of the passages seem distinct and part of a later biblical tradition. Terence E. Fretheim remarks on the mixed-genre of Numbers: 'The complex character of Numbers is evident in the genres it includes: lists, itineraries, statutes, ritual and priestly prescriptions, poetic oracles, songs, wilderness stories, and even a well-known benediction' (Fretheim, 2010: 85). It is not necessary to explore the wide variety of opinions regarding the precise dating of the specific sections, but it is enough, for this article, to say that Numbers is composed of multiple sources, forms, and genres compiled over a long period of time by multiple

writers and redactors.[6] For this reason, it is necessary to consider the heterogeneity of the biblical text as significant of an influence as the postmodern tradition on Cohen's novel.

Wandering Through the Desert and Online

Besides adopting structures and forms common in the biblical Numbers, Cohen's novel relies on themes and narratives that Cohen sees as central to the biblical text. One of Cohen's primary concerns is the pattern of wandering. In a 2015 interview with Gideon Lewis-Kraus, Cohen explains the significance behind the novel's title. Describing Numbers' Hebrew title, Cohen states, 'The Hebrew *Bamidbar* means "In the Wilderness" or "In the Desert". But there's a mystical, Kabbalistic tradition that says spin the word's vowels around and you get *midaber*, meaning "speak". The interpretation being: the wilderness teaches us to speak. The wilderness is where a people is formed' (Cohen, 2015d: n. pag.). For Cohen, the biblical narrative is about wandering in the wilderness, as well as about learning to 'speak' and forming community.

Wandering in the wilderness or the desert is clearly significant in the biblical Numbers. Angered by the Israelites' rebellion and threats against Joshua and Caleb, God pronounces judgement on the Israelites. Initially, God threatens to completely annihilate the Israelites and start a new nation with Moses: 'I will strike them with

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[6] Here are just some of the many critics who recognize the lack of unity in Numbers. Martin North writes: 'There can be no question of the unity of the book of Numbers, nor of its originating from the hand of a single author. This is already clear from the confusion and lack of order in its contents. It is also clear from the juxtaposition of quite varied styles and methods of presentation, as well as from the repeated confrontation of factually contradictory concepts in one and the same situation' (North, 1968: 4). Baruch A. Levine agrees: 'In its textual makeup, Numbers is the most diverse of all Torah books. It includes historiographic narratives, collections of early Hebrew poetry, and extensive legal and ritual texts. In addition to its generic diversity, Numbers also exhibits a complex literary history' (Levine, 1993: 48). Finally, Jacob Milgrom recognizes Numbers's diversity: 'The generic variety that characterizes Numbers surpasses that of any other book of the Bible. Note these examples narrative (4:13), poetry (21:17–18), prophecy (24:3–9), victory song (21:27–30, pre-Isrealite), prayer (12:13), blessing (6:24–26), lampoon (22:22–35), diplomatic letter (21:14–19), civil law (27:1–11), cultic law (15:17–21), oracular decision (15:32–36), census lists (26:1–51), temple archive (7:10–88), itinerary (33:1–49)' (Milgrom, 1990: xiii).

pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they' (Attridge, 2006; Numbers 14.12). However, God lessens his punishment and sentences the older generation to death in the wilderness and the younger to a period of wandering: 'But as for you, your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness. And your children shall be shepherds in the wilderness for forty years, and shall suffer for your faithlessness, until the last of your dead bodies lies in the wilderness' (14.13). As punishment, God sentences the Israelites to a forty-year period of wandering before entering the Promised Land.

As in the biblical account, Cohen's narrative traces characters who physically wander, from different cities and different countries. Joshua seems to wander throughout the novel, from New York City, where he lives, to Palo Alto and Dubai, where he begins ghostwriting for Principal. Joshua is only one of many characters who wander around the world. Principal's interviews recall a wandering around the globe, ranging from 'Two days in Berlin, two days in Moscow-Skolkovo, two days in Seoul-Teheran-ro. With Dubai and Paris and London, enough' (Cohen, 2015a: 410). Joshua, Principal, and other characters throughout the novel seem always to wander, constantly moving between cities, a feature of the text that reinforces the novel's fragmented feeling.

While characters physically wander through the novel's world, Cohen's interest in wandering also bespeaks a textual wandering. In addition to the mixed-genre of the novel, Cohen's work creates a wandering effect by retaining the fictional Joshua's unedited notes and drafts for Principal's biography. Within eleven pages, Joshua writes and rewrites at least five drafts of the biography: 'Yehoshuah Kohen was a born in the shtetl of Bershad, on the Southern Bug, halfway between the Kieve and Odessa, Russian Empire, presently Ukraine' (Cohen, 2015a: 165), to: 'We were born in the year of the microprocessor, LGBT Pride Month, the Day of the Death of Mohammed [June 9, 1971]' (Cohen, 2015a: 166), to: 'Communication is a useful [tool [way] to understand Cohen's family' (Cohen, 2015a: 167), to: 'One hundred years before PARC's inception, Yehoshua Kohen was born in 1870, in the shtetl of Bershad, on the Southern Bug, halfway between Kiev and Odessa, Russian Empire, presently Ukraine' (Cohen, 2015a: 169), to: 'Sari's parents, Imre and Ilona Le Vay, were Hungarians to the

Americans, but Jews to the Hungarians' (Cohen, 2015a: 176). Joshua's drafts, which include notes and crossed-out sentences, force the reader, unsure of the novel's direction and focus, to wander between different passages—different retellings of the 'truth'.

For Cohen, wandering takes on a third dimension, not just a textual and physical wandering but a reference to the period of the computer age, a time of freedom from the printed text yet a bondage to digital technology. Cohen writes that his novel 'encrypts my experience of this transition, from the culture of the book, which I continue to idolize, to an online Zion—a Zion 2.0—that will remain in Beta forever. The forty years of Numbers became 1971 (the microchips) through 2011 (the leaks)' (Cohen, 2015b: n. pag.). Cohen allegorizes wandering to represent the cultural and social shift toward the digital age and away from the print age. Within the novel, Joshua, as narrator, often captures this change from print to digital culture. Early on, Joshua describes the release of his book and recognizes the upcoming digital transformation of book sales: 'He, Finnity, scheduled the publication for "the holidays" (Christmas), which in the publishing industry means scheduled for a season before "the holidays" (Christmas), to be set out front in the fall at whatever nonchain bookstores were at the time being replaced by chain bookstores about to be replaced by your preferred online retailer' (Cohen, 2015a: 11). Later, while in Frankfurt, Joshua, considering the widespread use of machines, experiences a flashback to Miriam's bookstore:

> With our turn I hung back, pointlessly because Lisabeth faced fully machineward, screening me from the screen and the keypad, her mouth-breathing fogging the prompts but not her compliance. To both sides other patrons swiped, tapped, scifi luminance and blare, sci-nonfi. The units were teleporters, timemachines. This wasn't Frankfurt anymore, but Whitehall Street 2002. This was Miri's bookstore, but in its afterlife as bank, and not even a full service bank, just machined, a Chase, which anytime I visited Aar's office above it I took command, chase the past forever. This was Achsa knew she stood in, tile, plateglass, she knew what'd happened to her mother's

books, the same thing that'd happened to her mother. They'd gone away and been turned into money. She'd asked how the cash got into the machine and Aar'd asked her back, just guess. Achsa'd said maybe it was printed, like a printer was housed inside each unit. Try again. Maybe it was like a sewer, she'd said, or like with trees, the roots of trees, the money was always just flowing through tubes, which routed it to blossom at locations of customer request. (Cohen, 2015a: 535–6)

In Cohen's flashback, Achsa realizes that physical books are metaphorically dead, remnants of the past. Achsa's comical belief that the ATM is 'like a printer' or 'like a sewer' or 'like with trees', further demonstrates her cognitive difficulties processing digital developments. To readers, Achsa, as a young child, seems cute or playfully comical in this moment, as she attempts to understand new technology through her existing perceptual lens. Achsa's innocent difficulty in understanding the ATM parallels a wider social and cultural anxiety about shifting from print to digital media, or even a wider reluctance to leave the print world behind.

More significant to this article, Achsa's incident echoes some of the difficulties the Israelites faced as they wandered in the desert. One of the central concerns of Numbers is the difficult transition from enslavement in Egypt to residence in the Promised Land. Fretheim summarizes Numbers as a wilderness narrative about learning to form a new community: 'As a long-oppressed community, Israel has a deeply ingrained identity as "slaves". It does not have the resources to move quickly to a "slaves no more" (Lev 26.13) mentality; God must be at work to enable them to "walk erect" once again' (Fretheim, 2010: 186). Echoing Fretheim, Stephen J. Binz likewise sees Numbers as a period of transition for the Israelites: 'The desert period is a time of probation, a time to adjust their attitude of slavery, overcome their fears, and take on a new set of values' (Binz, 2016: 31). Returning to Cohen's novel, we see how Achsa's struggle to make sense of the ATM recalls the Israelites' attempts to understand themselves as a group of people who are no longer slaves. Both Achsa and the Israelites struggle with approaching their new experiences in light of their past social, cultural, or technological understanding. Cohen's novel, then, attempts to

speak to the difficulties of transition and community-building, whether experienced in the wilderness or while 'wandering' from the print to the digital age.

Internet: The Promised Land

If the print world represents a kind of enslavement, the internet becomes a new type of Promised Land. Here, Cohen situates his novel within a contemporary cultural hope in technology: the belief that the technological world offers greater freedom, connectivity, and progress. In his monograph on mysticism and technology, Erik Davis analyzes this cultural hope in digital technology, writing: 'By the end of the 1980s, cyberspace had become a cultural attraction, sucking an increasingly computerized society forward with the relentless force of a *Star Wars* tractor beam' (Davis, 1998: 191). Later, Davis notes that '[w]hile the dominant mystical images of cyberspace today stress its unity as a global electronic mind, [William] Gibson suggests that the dynamism of polytheism may be a more appropriate religious metaphor for the chaos of the new environment' (Davis, 1998: 196). Cohen's novel investigates and relies on the contemporary belief that the technological has become a sacred space, offering connective experiences that traditional religions have failed to provide.

Drawing on the twentieth-century techno-spiritual beliefs, Cohen's characters often talk about the internet in terms of religion. Joshua recalls when Moe aligned the internet with Hinduism:

> Hinduism had invented the cosmology that had been plagiarized online. The net, the web, just a void and in the void a wilderness, a jungle of hardware sustaining a diversity of software, of sites, of all out of order pages, a pantheon to be selectively engaged, an experience special to each user. Each click was a dedicated worship, an act of mad propitiation that hazarded destruction. (Cohen, 2015: 266)

According to Moe, the internet is like complex and diverse Hindu pantheon, and each click on the internet is like the Hindu act of Bhakti. To use the internet is to worship the divine.

Elsewhere, the novel casts the computer in the Abrahamic tradition in which the body is 'hardware' and 'software is God, wandering, doubted, bloodless, able only to describe itself' (Cohen, 2015a: 400). Earlier in the novel, Principal recalls when his grandfather shared the significance of the stars and clouds, objects that, in Principal's techno-imagination, become synonymous with satellites and cloud computing.[7] The grandfather explains: 'Clouds were made out of the same stuff the ocean was, water…and that water was as cold as the earth, billions of years old'. Principal continues, recalling: 'Then it was fully night and the stars were in full relief and Joseph pointed out how they too had shapes like clouds, or were as shapeable as clouds' (Cohen, 2015a: 182). The sky, for the grandfather, represents a way to engage with a collective past and with ancestors, but, for Principal, 'these communications would become stored in these stars, turning them into mutual archives, common caches, omnipresent and yet evanescent. From which they could be accessed not at a certain time or from a certain place…but at any time, and from any place' (Cohen, 2015a: 185). Principal recognizes the spiritual significance and connective power of the sky, but shifts his attention to the digital stars—satellites—and the 'cloud', imbuing these technologies with the same significance. In the novel's technological world, the internet and similar technologies replace God as the one to be worshiped and provide a new connection to a collective past.

A New Bondage: Surveillance and Alienation

While Cohen's characters wander in the desert, free from the print culture, yearning for complete freedom, they realize that their freedom is ultimately a new form of bondage. An excerpt from Joshua's fictional book captures this tension between freedom and slavery: 'Diaspora Jews have inherited not a tradition but a rupture. If we were enslaved, it was to fashion; if we were liberated, it was by wandering the deserts between channels; if we fought wars, they were against our own parents; if we had any true enemies, they were ourselves' (Cohen, 2015a: 163). In Joshua's

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[7] The association of cloud computing with God should remind us of God appearing 'in a pillar of cloud' to the Israelites in Exodus 13:21.

rendering, liberation comes at the expense of 'wandering the deserts'; it is a freedom that is limited and enslaving in a new way.

In an interview, when asked about the Judeo-Christian background of *Book of Numbers* and its relation to technology, Cohen reflects on the ways in which we understand surveillance—both in terms of religious traditions and the contemporary surveillance state:

> Omniscience—that's the Judeo-Christian problem. It relates to sin. A large portion of the world believed for a very long time that God could hear and see absolutely everything. That belief was so strong that not a few modern people, in not a few modern societies, still swear by it—at least I'm told they do. God knows when you're lying, where you're lying, and with whom—if you're jerking off…
>
> The Enlightenment changed things. It scoffed at God's role, even at His existence, but it kept the church—rather it transferred the church's power to the state. The individual's primary legibility, and accountability, was now to a government, which began developing and otherwise acquiring the technology to render it godlike: able to monitor, able to surveil. (Cohen, 2015c: n. pag.)

Part of Cohen's sense of enslavement is the widespread monitoring of internet activities—both by governments and corporations—an activity that Cohen sees as once belonging to God. Internet monitoring seems to diverge distinctly from the biblical account; yet Cohen links internet monitoring to the census that opens the biblical narrative. Numbers opens with God commanding Moses to conduct a census of each tribe: 'Take a census of the whole congregation of Israelites, according to the number of names, every male individually; from twenty years old and upward, everyone in Israel able to go to war' (1.1–3). Later, in his anger, God announces: 'Your dead bodies shall fall in this very wilderness; and of all your number, included in the census, from twenty years old and upward, who have complained against me, not one of you shall come into the land' (14.29–30). In an exegesis of Numbers' opening, Cohen argues that the census, as a form of tracking information, later becomes

central to the Israelites' punishment: 'God orders Moses to poll the members of each tribe: Moses thinks he's raising an army, God knows he's counting the dead. None of the numbered will be allowed to cross the Jordan into Canaan–none will survive to fulfill the Promise of the Land' (Cohen, 2015b: n. pag.). By thinking of the census in terms of tracking information, Cohen places the modern surveillance state in a long history of surveillance, going back to Numbers.

For *Book of Numbers*, the September 11, 2001 attacks increase technology use and eventually surveillance. The attacks extensively expand the power of the internet and digital technology. Principal comments: '2001 was the millennium returned. The cable channels had transmitted the fall of the Wall, and of the Soviet sputnik satellites, by satellite. The towers went down pure online' (Cohen, 2015a: 377). Not only did the documenting and broadcasting of the September 11 attacks occur online, but the events seem to have resulted in an increased reliance on the internet and newer forms of technology. Describing the impact of the attacks on cellphone use, Principal continues:

> But the tower events were not just online, they were all communications. More sites, more gadgets, more wars…But the serious offline impact of 09/11 was the continual contact, continuous contact, it encouraged. On 09/12 everyone went out and bought phones. The mobiles, the cells. Suddenly, to lose touch was to die and the only prayer left for anyone who felt buried whether under information or debris was for a signal strong enough to let their last words outlive them on voicemail. (Cohen, 2015a: 378)

Cellphones become crucial as 'lifeline[s]' because, as Cohen writes, 'to lose touch was to die'. *Book of Numbers* emphasizes that digital technology offers a connection to others, but ultimately, the connection becomes a type of enslavement.

In the decade following 2001, Tetration expands their surveillance technologies, sometimes for their own purposes, other times for the government's.[8] Tetration

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[8] Tetration is a mathematical term, which corresponds well with the high-tech spirit of the novel. Tetra, the prefix meaning 'four', is also a nod to the fourth book of the Hebrew Scriptures.

develops apps, particularly Autotet, that use previous search history and other user data to prompt users toward certain websites. As Principal explains: 'Autotet is an app that searches without having been instructed to find, collecting terms from Tetmail and Tetset, from all our products and services, and then generating a unique online experience for each use, by directing them to pertinent sites they have never before and might never otherwise have visited' (Cohen, 2015a: 386). Shortly after, Principal reveals that Tetration had a function that automatically reported data to the government: 'Meaning that all our millennial consumers [were] convinced they were entrusting their information to an overpriced blinking beeping storage device were also entrusting it to American intelligence' (Cohen, 2015a: 406). The cellphones that were lifelines following the September 11 attacks become tracking devices for the government. Like the biblical census, computer technology results in widespread monitoring and a new type of enslavement to the internet.

In the novel, this new enslavement often has detrimental effects to mental and physical health. Joshua, in a hotel where he ghostwrites Principal's biography, laments that the room 'isn't quite a hotel. It's a cemetery for people both deceased and on vacation, who still check in daily with work' (Cohen, 2015a: 6). Instead of enjoying vacation away from work, the internet encourages—seemingly forces—employees to continue to check work emails. Moreover, Joshua recognizes the physical harm that the technology causes: 'As for yours truly, I've been sitting with my laptop atop a pillow on my lap to keep those wireless hotspot waveparticles from reaching my genitals and frying my sperm, searching up—with my employer's technology—myself, and Rach. My wife, my ex, my "x2b"' (Cohen, 2015a: 6). The alignment of the physical frying of Joshua's sperm and his 'x2b' emphasize technology's destructive potential for relationships, a breakdown that is represented by the potential threat of infertility. Similarly, later, Moe imagines an evolutionary design, 'larger and thicker skulls' to protect humans' 'brains from being microwaved by wifi' (Cohen, 2015a: 359). In the novel's world, both the laptop and wifi threaten human health.

In addition to harming reproductive health, digital technology, specifically the internet, with its instant access to others, creates a confused and fragmented sense of the self. Principal represents the alienating loss of self, caused by the internet in

Cohen's world. Joshua begins: 'You call the person you're writing "the principal" and mine is basically the internet, the web—that's how he's positioned, that's how he's converged: the man who helped us invent the thing, rather the man who helped it to invent us, in the process shredding the hell out of the paper I've dedicated my life to' (Cohen, 2015a: 6). Principal no longer retains his human identity; he becomes a symbol, fused with the internet.

Principal is not the only one alienated in *Book of Numbers*; the novel's technological world alienates and confuses readers. For example, Principal reflects: 'We flamed the PARCy with emails, as like the same avatars but registered with other services. batchelor but now @Prodigy, cuddlemaven but not @GEnie. We even went trolling for him among the dossy BBSes and subscribed to leetish listservers' (Cohen, 2015a: 216). Principal's lack of clarity functions in at least two ways: first, it emphasizes the ways in which technology and tech-speak has impacted Principal's ability to socialize and communicate effectively, and, second, the language confuses readers, forcing them to experience the alienation caused by Tetration's technology.

Throughout the novel, Cohen's multiple levels of layering with his own name, the writer Joshua Cohen, and the CEO Joshua Cohen, draw attention to this confusion and blurring of self. The fictional Joshua reflects: 'I've spent my whole entire virtual experience subordinate to Principal, reloading my name as it became his, reloading it into becoming his—but it's only now that I can regret my collaboration: the more I clicked on him, the more he became me and I became nobody' (Cohen, 2015a: 121). Joshua loses his identity through his continued 'clicks' on Principal. According to Cohen:

> The internet gives nearly instant access to others with the same names. Technology has made all of our lives double-stories. We all find our doppelgängers online, people with the same names as us, people who maybe live the lives we would like to live, but most of the time are lives we can be pleased we don't live. But we are chagrined when we are mistaken for them…Instead of the name being about the quality of a person, we are at a place now where these names are quantified. Who is the Joshua Cohen who is winning the internet? (Cohen, 2016: n. pag.)

The doubling effect of the internet challenges notions of the self, in which one is identified by his or her unique name. Suddenly, the unique Joshua Cohen becomes one of many Joshua Cohens, and the other Joshua Cohens arguably live more attractive and successful lives. Moreover, the doubling effect of the internet advances the breakdown of relationships. According to Cohen, people become reduced to their quantifiable names rather than the 'quality of a person'. Thus, within Cohen's novel, the internet is as harmful as it is liberating. Like God, the internet offers a sense of protection; yet, Cohen's characters find that they are in a cycle of slavery once again. They find themselves constantly monitored and feel alienated from themselves and each other. As in the biblical account, the praises of God or the internet turn to rebellion.

Moving Beyond God

Unsatisfied with their newly gained freedom, the Israelites and Cohen's characters complain. In the biblical Numbers, God anticipates: 'This people will begin to prostitute themselves to the foreign gods in their midst, the gods of the land into which they are going; they will forsake me, breaking my covenant that I have made with them' (31.16). Even before God's predictions, the Israelites complain about their new freedom: 'the people complained in the hearing of the Lord about their misfortunates' (11.1). Along with the Israelites, the rabble, likely a non-Israelite group, similarly joins the complaining and rejects their new freedom, yearning for their previous lives in Egypt: 'The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, "If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at" (11.4–6). Later, the Israelites continue their complaining, wishing: 'Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why is the Lord bringing us into this land to fall by the sword?' (14.2–3). The rabble and the Israelites reject their new freedom, instead wishing that they had either stayed or died in Egypt.

Like the rabble who attempt to reject God, Cohen's characters attempt to resist digital technology and the internet. As I have mentioned, the novel opens with a

call for resistance: 'If you're reading this on a screen, fuck off. I'll only talk if I'm gripped with both hands' (Cohen, 2015a: 6). Additionally, the fictional Joshua—and allegedly the real Cohen—go offline for the second portion of the text.[9] One character challenges the fictional writer and criticizes the supposed freedom the internet creates: 'Your libertization is a fiction, which must be maintained so that particular pressures can be exerted upon particular regimes, in order to deprive them of their resources....This falsehood is not just your god but also your idol. You are enslaved to it, and so you enslave us too' (Cohen, 2015a: 120). Joshua attempts to actualize his 'libertization' by avoiding Tetrating, a goal that is not so easily achieved for Joshua. His refusal to Tetrate comes with a constant urge to Tetrate and an inability to imagine a world without Tetration. He wonders: 'what's the difference between raveling and unraveling?' and 'is the proper term not socket but outlet?', and he wants to Tetrate the answers. However, Joshua refuses, repeating: 'Don't tetrate, resist the urge to tetrate' (Cohen, 2015a: 141). Joshua attempts to reject Tetration, as God, but begins to realize that it is impossible to return to the print world.

Punishment

Although the acts of rebellion against the internet do not directly result in death as a punishment, Cohen clearly invokes the biblical punishment. The close of the novel harkens back to God's warning in the biblical Numbers. God angrily announces: 'I will do to you the very things I heard you say: your dead bodies shall fall in this very wilderness; and all of your number, included in the census, from twenty years old and upward, who have complained against, not one of you shall come into the land....But as for you your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness' (14.28–32). After wandering in the wilderness, older generations will not make it to the Promised Land.

Cohen makes God's threats of death the literal ending of his novel. On the novel's penultimate page, Principal's corpse washes ashore: 'A body was hauled out of the river Ganges, Varanasi, India, 11/19 or 20, apparently' (Cohen, 2015a: 579). The

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[9] In an interview, Cohen, the author, explains that he, like the fictional Joshua, stayed offline for a section of the novel: 'I wrote that section, and edited that section, without searching anything up. Information being the enemy of the novel' (Cohen, 2015d: n. pag.).

body's genetic markers match Principal's, and '[n]o pics or vids of the body exist or have—like a missing pancreas—leaked yet' (Cohen, 2015a: 579). Yet, more bodies fall in the wilderness. Cohen's final paragraph begins: 'Into December, another whitish body washed up in a drainage culvert', which people identity as 'Principal, already decaying' (Cohen, 2015a: 580). The bodies continue to fall: 'Subsequent corpses turned up in Cairo, Lisbon, Kifl Haris outside Nabl (Palestinian Territories). The great wheel turned and memed. Live in the flesh spottings in Brazil were a thing. Principal was a wayfarer in a Finnish disco' (Cohen, 2015a: 580). The novel's closing scene captures the literal deaths of those who wandered between the print and the digital era. However, the scene also describes the metaphorical deaths and losses of self. In the closing pages, Principal is no longer an identifiable body; instead, multiple corpses seem to appear, echoing back to the tripling of the Joshua Cohens.

Principal's multiple deaths additionally echo Moe's deaths earlier in the novel. Principal recounts: 'Moe had been found. Just now. Dead. Committed suicide in Canada. Hanged by a belt from Montreal' (Cohen, 2015a: 351). Moe's death is not a simple suicide, however. His death reflects the internet's role in fragmenting identity. Principal continues:

> Moe had liquidated through the mesh. He had vaped himself. The balance of his direct deposit Chase Bank checking account had been transferred and all future payments to it had been set to auto transfer to a savings account registered to the Goa Orphanage of Achievement Trust, Oriental Bank of Commerce, funds that had remained untapped until their seizure by the India Reserve, whose inquiry determined that no such orphanage existed. No images were provided to us and since the Americans refused to take the body from Canada because it was not clear that Vishnu Fernandes [Moe] ever existed, or was Vishnu Vaidya, or was a citizen, he, Mohlone, whoever, was cremated in Montreal. All this according to Kor who brought us the cremation report along with the files of the Vishnus obtained from various Bay Area hospitals pertaining to treatment for dissociative identity, formerly multiple personality disorder, and depression. (Cohen, 2015a: 353)

Moe, as one of the central figures who developed Tetration, commits suicide but loses—or disperses—his identity, as well. Instead of remaining located to a single point, Moe vanishes into the mesh, wireless networks consisting of multiple routers and clients. Similarly, the Goa Orphanage of Achievement Trust's nonexistence points to the internet's lack of physical 'place', which consequentially emphasizes Moe's lack of a physical, stable identity. As Moe merges with the internet, he becomes a personified wilderness, a place of wandering that, like the internet, exists in no physical space. His body is unidentifiable—neither Moe nor Vishnu Fernandes nor Vishnu Vaidya nor Mohlone. The cremation of Moe's body further reinforces his disembodied state, remaining no longer as a corpse but a set of ashes. Moe becomes dispersed, as ashes, into the mesh.

Moe's death emphasizes more than the way that the internet moves him beyond a physical location to a 'no place'. His death reveals a fragmented identity, an embodiment that is spread out over multiple people and based in networks. His dissolution into the mesh, of course, hints at his multiple embodiments. Principal reveals that Moe had been treated for 'dissociative identity' or 'multiple personality disorder'. Moe, who becomes part of the mesh, suffers from a fragmented identity—arguably as the result of his intimate relationship with internet technology. In the final pages of the novel, Cohen emphasizes Moe's multiple embodiment: 'Consider this: A dozen Moes crashed Principal's "medimorial" (meditation memorial) held at the Tetplex, four of them legally named Vishu and one even named Vishu Fernandes' (Cohen, 2015a: 579–80). Moe appears, not just as one person, but as a dozen, with many different names. In Cohen's *Book of Numbers*, the older generation's bodies fall, losing their sense of identity as well as literally dying before reaching a Promised Land.

Glimpses of Hope
Despite their inclusion of wandering and death, both the biblical and Cohen's Numbers end with a move, albeit slight, toward hope. In the biblical account, as I have mentioned, God initially plans to annihilate the Israelites, except Moses, but God lessens the punishment, allowing Joshua, Caleb, and the younger generation

to live. The end of Numbers looks forward in anticipation of the future and new life, a reminder that the younger generation will make it to the Promised Land. The final chapter once again presents the daughters of Zelophehad, and members of the tribe Manasseh come to Moses, seeking clarification about marriage outside the tribe and property transfer. Moses, after apparently consulting God, determines that the daughters may marry within their own tribe 'so that no inheritance of the Israelites shall be transferred from one tribe to another' (36.7). While the closing chapter seemingly moves away from narrative to a legal section, Moses' legal interpretation still serves a significant narrative function, using questions about marriage and property to emphasize both the continuation of the Israelites and the promise of land.

Many commentators similarly agree that that the last chapter of Numbers is hopeful, pointing to new life. According to Adriane Leveen, the final chapters ends with a promise of preserving culture: 'That those legal stipulations are concerned with the relationships between a father and his daughters beautifully reinforces the underlying, even haunting force of this narrative of two generations...[and] the preservation and transmission of tradition and collective memory—and the ultimate resolution of that concern in the new generation' (Leveen 2008: 181). For Leveen, concerns about marriage bespeak the intergenerational aspect of the text, one that recalls the past, while striving towards the future. Mary Douglas, looking at both the historical context and cyclical structure of Numbers, sees the book ending with a promise of renewal. Douglas argues: 'While the Numbers community is still weeping in the desert, Israel blossoms and buds as the Isaiah prophesied; the Jewish New Year is inaugurated, time is renewed, the promises have been kept, and the Second Temple community is constituting itself' (Douglas, 1993: 247). Leveen and Douglas use different approaches, but ultimately they arrive at the same conclusion— that Numbers ends hopefully with a promise of collective continuation and land inheritance.

Cohen's novel ends with a confusing and chaotic scene of Principal's decaying bodies appearing all over the world; this is hardly hopeful. Yet, the final sentence moves toward new life, a new generation raised in the Promised Land of digital

technology. The novel ends: 'The wheel was turning me 40. A child was born in Kanazawa, Ishikawa, whose soul was recognized as his' (Cohen, 2015a: 580). The novel's ending, with its mention of the birth of a child, recalls the biblical account's anticipation of future generations entering the Promised Land. That the child is born in Kanazawa reminds readers of Principal's visit to a monastery there and suggests that the child is his. The child's birth reminds readers of Principal's realization, in Japan, that '1.0, the first online generation, was over' (Cohen, 2015a: 370). Thus, the novel ends with the first online generation dying out but also with the birth of a younger generation, offering a slight moment of hope.

Still, even in this hopeful vision, Cohen's novel retains ambiguity. Joshua mentions that the child is born and the 'soul was recognized as his' (Cohen, 2015a: 580). Readers guess that Joshua means that the child is Principal's, but the circuitous phrasing prevents absolute certainty. The child is 'recognized as' rather than the definite 'is'. The 'his' is likewise ambiguous, likely—although not certainly—referring back two sentences to Principal. *Book of Numbers*, then, moves optimistically toward the younger generation, but continues the ambiguity that is central to the novel's fragmented technological world.

Concluding Thoughts

In her work on 'narrative induction', renowned sociolinguist Charlotte Linde argues that communities make meaning out of their lives and experiences by taking 'existing set of stories as their own story' (Linde, 2000: 68). Cohen's novel is certainly no exception. This article has shown how Cohen adopts Numbers as his own story, recasting the wandering in the wilderness as a cultural movement—rather than a movement purely of the people—away from print to digital culture, society, and technology. Not only does *Book of Numbers* exemplify Linde's concept of narrative induction, but the novel demonstrates the remarkable endurance of the biblical text. The Numbers narrative, with its emphasis on wandering, community-building, enslavement, and freedom, still resonates with today's social and cultural anxieties and concerns.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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