

## **Chapter Eight- Oral Tradition and Classical Midrash.**

**#1 Introduction to Midrashic Existential Approach: Pshat versus Derash**  
by Noam Zion and Steve Israel p. 3

**#2 Experiential Approach:** p. 7  
Beginning with the Life of the Student Before Analyzing the Text  
**MARSHALLING OUR EXPERIENCE ON BIRTH ORDER:  
FIRST BORN - PLAGUE OR PRIVILEGE?**

**#3 A GALLERY OF MIDRASHIC STYLES** by Joel Lurie Grishaver p. 8

**#4 Searching for Meaning in Midrash: WHAT IS MIDRASH?** p. 12  
By Michael Katz and Gershon Schwartz  
The Hammer on Rock Model of Midrash  
**IS THERE STILL MIDRASH TODAY?**

### **Appendices**

**The Slayers Moses** by Susan A. Handelman p. 21  
**The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory**

**Rabbinic Midrash as Commentary and Story**  
Summarized from Joshua Levinson, *The Twice Told Tale*  
*The Poetics of the Exegetical Narrative in Rabbinic Midrash* p. 30

**Bibliography on MIDRASH - CLASSICAL AND MODERN** p. 34

**The Ancient Interpreters versus the Modern Historical Critical Readers**  
from James Kugel, *How to Read the Bible*

## Introduction

As James Kugel in *The Bible As It Was* and Yair Zakovitz and Avigdor Shinan have shown, there is a rich oral context of Biblical storytelling which preceded and postdated the crystallization of the Biblical texts. Each time the story was retold it was flexibly adapted and various simultaneous versions coexisted. (For example, David of Beit Lehem is the slayer of Goliath in I Samuel 17 and Elchanan of Beit Lehem killed Goliath according to II Samuel 21:19). The versions reflected different solutions to the historical, ideological and literary issues of the stories. Even after the Biblical canon was completed textually there were rewrites at the level of the Book of Jubilees that retells in Biblical style the whole of *Genesis* with many deep differences reflecting among things a different calendar or retellings by Philo and Josephus.

James Kugel argues that the "Bible as Bible" does not exist until Second Temple Jews related to it as Bible, as canon and that occurs by their embedding it in their own interpretations. "Interpretation is inevitably a kind of second authorship." "It was *their* Bible and no ragtag collection of ancient Near Eastern texts." Therefore reading Tanakh without the history of its interpretation is not really reading the Jewish Bible but studying ancient Near eastern fragments of literature.

The Rabbis invented their own form of rewriting called midrash which integrates literary creation of new texts with the style of commentary which quotes the Biblical text before filling in gaps and offering alternative readings and adding embellishments freely.

Torah has already within it internal midrash - that is, intentional reinterpretations that seeks to expand or reinterpret or even to rewrite or to extrapolate from the Torah. For example, *Megillat Esther* extrapolates from the Saul and Agag story and allows Mordechai, Saul's descendant, to do a *tikkun* in which Agag's descendant will be killed and his spoils will not be appropriated.

In the modern period creative literary midrash whether as free form commentary or as full scale retelling has been revived first by Christians (for example, the Dutch school of art focused on Hebrew Bible and Handel's Biblical oratorios etc ) and chiefly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Jews in Bibliodrama or art or poetry or movies or novels. These creative responses to the Torah are themselves forms of interpretation, of gap filling, that emerge from the dialogue of the text and the contemporary context of its reader/rewriter's need for personal meaning.

# #1 Introduction to Midrashic-Existential Approach:

## Pshat versus Derash

by Noam Zion and Steve Israel

As educators we may let issues arise inductively and discursively from the text of the Torah or we can frame the big questions in order to define the universe of discourse of our study and then read closely for clues to that major question. The existentialist philosopher of Judaism, Abraham Joshua Heschel, insisted that the proper study of traditional text begins with these big philosophical questions for Jewish texts are attempts to answer them, not merely historical facts or maxims to be handed down from generation to generation - lest we forget. Heschel's great fear was that we would forget the questions.

In teaching a book or a chapter we use **thematic framings** by which an educator may introduce the student to the importance of the story so as to focus one's attention and to arouse the associations from life and literature and the rest of the Torah that we wish our students to bring to the brief text we are exploring. As Judah Goldin, professor of Midrash, wrote: "**Text and experience are mutually enlightening.**" Thus the framing helps the students marshal experience to illumine the text and to identify existentially meaningful phenomena on which the text may shed its light for the student.

### Methods - Pshat and Midrash:

#### Two Approaches to the Search for Answers in the Torah

Many Biblical narratives, like the story of Cain and Abel, became a timeless vehicle for the examination of the themes (for example, violence, sibling rivalry and lack of self-control). This a form of **narrative philosophical anthropology** that begins to articulate but does not claim to solve all the problems. So it is hardly surprising that as each generation seeks to understand the perennial issues it returns to study the original model story.

What enabled them to do this are the many "holes" in the story. **Gaps** are inevitable in any complex story which attempts to tell itself in only sixteen essential verses. For example, a modern novelist would take hundreds of pages to develop the powerful themes brought in the story. John Steinbeck took some seven hundred pages to work out some of the themes in his version, *East of Eden*. But the Biblical narrator took less than a page. The result, in inimitable Biblical fashion, are the holes. Some are obvious and hit us in even the most cursory reading: what did Cain say to Abel when they were in the field? Others only hit us on reflection and thought: why do Adam and Eve disappear? What did they have to say about the tragic events? And there are so many others.

The answers have been thought in two different mindsets, two different styles - **Pshat** and **Midrash**.

The midrashic commentators, old and new, had a more literary bent, more a style of fiction than non-fiction to express their own concerns and their own generation, exploring the prismatic story of Genesis 4 to do that. Their tool for doing this was the

creation of **midrash to fill gaps** and to write or rewrite the story in a literary way.<sup>1</sup> Early rabbinic generations during the Greco-Roman era in Eretz Yisrael developed classic midrashim often as part of their public sermons in the synagogue prior to Torah reading. Modern generations in the 20<sup>th</sup> century developed their own "midrashim" in the form of literary and artistic retellings, poems, art, dialogues, and introspective psychological musing. In this booklet we will draw selectively on the plethora of texts, literary and artistic, that provide the full multi-generational midrashic response in the widest sense of the word. We will explore all three of the themes mentioned here, one at a time, in the order in which they appear in the text, sibling rivalry, self control and violence, and we will attempt to draw the students into the text through an examination of the subjects examined. Our aims are to show the student the timeless nature of the issues and to illustrate how the specific text has served as a prism through which numerous scholars and thinkers in different generations have attempted to offer their opinions and to enter the endless debate. In addition to a careful pshat reading of the text, we will attempt to illustrate the richness and fascination of the midrashic process and encourage the participants to enter the debate and to identify as part of the process.

## **Pashtan versus Darshan**

In this booklet we use a large amount of traditional sources and it is important to make a distinction between the two different genres of traditional commentary, peshat and derash, that were used to elucidate the meaning of the biblical text. They were different forms that co-existed in the rabbinic world and it is easy to confuse them for they often overlap and they share some common ground. But let us define them in comparative terms so as to emphasize the salient features of each genre and to enable both comparison and distinction between them. Let us immediately state that when we use the term derash or midrash here, we are talking of the narrative genre known as midrash aggadah rather than the legal genre known as midrash halacha, which shares some but by no means all of the features of aggadic derash that we are outlining here. Midrash halacha plays no part in our booklet and therefore we do not explain the specifics of the genre here.

There are many scholarly characterizations of midrash aggadah. Sometimes it is restricted to the classical period of its creation by the Rabbis of Eretz Yisrael during the Hellenist Greco-Roman period. Sometimes it is assimilated to the oral literature of popular legends as in the usual translation of Sefer Ha-Aggadah. We however will propose a characterization by its motives and underlying theories of Torah in contrast to the pashtan - both the contemporary scholarly pashtan and the classical medieval pashtan. For us these are schools of interpretation that continue to produce commentary even today and that continue to beckon our students to participate in the process.

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<sup>1</sup> Pshat commentaries, medieval and modern, write analytically rather than literarily and they seek to be loyal to the historical context of the Torah. However they too are often midrashic in the sense not of their literary form, but in the way they betray the subjective concerns and assumptions of their generation. Whether or not they are good pshat, they are also midrash – maintaining a certain deeply felt understanding, in our case, of the origin of human violence – and as such they too have a value independent of their scientific accuracy.

Both derash and peshat aim to interpret the text of the Torah (or the other biblical books) and they tend to cover the same ground. They usually take their departure point from specific words or phrases in the Torah text. However, it is there that the similarity tends to end. The aim of the '**pashtan**' is to try and uncover through the use of philological tools or other logical or historical methods, **the real "one and only" original meaning of the text as spoken to its first generation of hearers, its author's one-intent**. The supposition is that there exists one correct meaning in the text and that precise methodologies gives us the best chance to elucidate this meaning by helping us separate our subjective from the objective meanings. The pashtan wants to try and recover the meaning of the text as it was given at a certain moment in time and knowing that the historical context of contemporary readers is different and therefore misleading when reading an ancient text because language, values, literary forms, institutions and other historical contexts change. The golden age of traditional peshat was in the middle ages among the scholars of Ashkenaz, Spain and North Africa. The locus of the peshat was often in a polemic with other scholars who needed to refute such as Karaites reading Bible carefully but independently from the rabbinic tradition, such as Christian scholars and Jewish apostates seeking to prove Christological readings from the Hebrew Bible, such as mystical or philosophic allegorists of the literal Bible. Inspired by historical, philological, grammatical and literary sciences developed in the Arab world and sharing perhaps the historical approach of the Christian 12<sup>th</sup> century Catholic Renaissance, pshat scholars argued with others and among themselves. Modern historical critical pashtanim use more sophisticated methods but their goal is the same. Pashtanim seek to strip away an accretion of misinterpretations to get a more accurate, more original meaning.

The '**darshan**' also tries to uncover the meaning of the text but the focal point of that meaning was **the meaning that the text should hold for the generation of the darshan**. The darshan also sees the text as coming from God at Sinai, but the departure point is the belief that the text had been given for all generations and that each generation had the right - indeed the obligation - of uncovering the meaning that God had intended it to understand. In fact God has prepared meanings for us and made them implicit in the text. The divinity and truth of the text is its multi-vocality, its polysemious nature - its pluralism of what might otherwise might be thought of as contradictory messages. Torah is expected to have **70 faces**, not one. The Torah has a dynamism of open-text still revealing itself rather than a closed canon. Misinterpretation by heretics or foolish ahistorical readers is less a threat than irrelevance to the pressing needs of today. The best example of the **existential pressure** that gives birth to midrash is Rivka's search for the meaning of her unusual pregnancy of the battling fetuses - *vateleich lidroash et Adonai* (Genesis 25: 22). Torah is meant to speak to those different needs as the Rabbinic midrashic manna matches the tastes of young and old simultaneously.

The darshan read the text as a contemporary text rather than as a one-time historical text, still relevant, but retaining its original meaning. The tools of the pashtan tend to be objective - philology was the central one - but the tools of the darshan are largely subjective. The darshan applied a creative imagination to the text in order to squeeze out answers even if the evidence is inadequate, gaps must be filled. The pashtan also offers hypotheses to fill gaps but seeks to be much more circumspect about the gap between evidence an hypothetical reconstruction. For the pashtan the meaning of the text stayed the same even if circumstances dictated different implications from time to

time. Different midrashic messages can stand side by side, without any feeling that they imply a fatal contradiction, something that is not possible in the world of peshat, where a single objective truth is valued. Argument is essential to pshat world of advance though comparative attempts to reach truth. However midrash seeks to add new possibilities every time a text is read not to complete a best-reading as the final goal of historical research. In fact the darshan joins the author of the Torah in creating new Torah, new narratives, not just new comments on a fixed text.

The world of the classical darshan was a public world. He worked among a public and the typical locus of derash was the synagogue with scholarly and on-scholarly listeners whose interest in Torah reading must be aroused and who need relevant new meaning as well as entertaining formulations. The darshan sees the job as bringing forth the relevance of the text, of bringing it nearer to a public which is in danger of losing touch with the vitality of the text, either for linguistic reasons or for reasons of the subject or values of the text. The darshan looks always to emphasize the moral ideas which would convince his audience of the contemporary relevance of the text. To this extent, this mode of engagement with the public makes the darshan more a popular educator than a scholar. Certainly the darshan would always look to find ways to connect his story to the text through a series of suggestive hooks in the original text through which to anchor the midrash, but having established the connection to the text, one could sail off on the wings of a powerful - and legitimate - midrashic imagination. If the pashtan tends to maintain a primary loyalty to the original text being explaining, the darshan looks to the audience whose spiritual needs for connection to the Torah take precedence. The present rather than the past has a higher standing. After all for the darshan Torah is always contemporary, while the pashtan is always aware of historical change.

Despite these differences pashtanim and darshaimim have shared a close reading of text - though they have different sense of what is a legitimate context in which to interpret it. They have shared a sense that the Torah has deep meanings to convey and makes a claim on us. In fact many pashtanim such as Ramban have held that there are many levels of reading the Torah beyond pshat, but when playing the pshat game of interpretation there are strict rules which the darshan will not be bound by.

### **Educational Caveat**

Many students of middle and high school struggling for their own self-definition are uncomfortable with midrashic readings that are not right or wrong, true or false. Many students critical of the "myths" that they have been "sold" as children are impatient with midrash as uncritical tool of searching to truth. Yet we believe those same students often can appreciate fictional literature and its sense of truth and they often believe in subjective pluralist truth even more strongly than objectively verifiable truth. Thus offering two different approaches - pshat and derash - comparing their advantages and disadvantages offers resources to both the proverbial left and right-brains of our students, so that they can draw on these resources when they are ready.

## **#2 Experiential Approach: Beginning with the Life of the Student Before Analyzing the Text**

### **MARSHALLING OUR EXPERIENCE ON BIRTH ORDER: FIRST BORN - PLAGUE OR PRIVILEGE?**

- *Genesis 4:1-2* describes the birth of the first son of humankind and his first brother. It will go on to describe the first murder - perpetrated by one brother upon another. Perhaps birth order is an important issue here. In order to understand the situation of Cain and to examine the possibility that birth order might play a part in this story, let us do the following preliminary exercise.
- Let the students write down what they think constitutes the special situation of the first born child. Is it a position with more advantages or disadvantages? What challenges, if any, does a first born child have to face that other children are perhaps spared? What about the situation of the second born or the last born child? Does birth order play a role in the students' family?
- Run a discussion on the above questions. As the students answer, they should identify themselves by birth order. Perhaps give our colored stickers color-coded for first, second etc. children. At first glance, can they think of any ways in which the things discussed might have impacted the story of Cain? Would the story have been exactly the same if Cain had been the second child?

## #3 A GALLERY OF MIDRASHIC STYLES

by Joel Lurie Grishaver

*Learning Torah: A Self-guided Journey through Layers of Jewish Learning*, Torah Aura/UAHC Press (p.131-133)

### 1. Puns and Wordplays

*And go to the land of Moriah.... (Gen. 22:2)*

Here is how Rabbi Hiyya the Elder and Rabbi Jannai discussed this verse in *Genesis Rabbah* 55:7.

**One said:** Moriah means the place where teaching is done.  
Moriah = MOREH (teacher).  
(This means the place in the Temple where the Sanhedrin studied and taught Jewish law.)

**The other said:** Moriah means the place where awe came into the world.  
Moriah = YIRAH (awe).  
(The Temple was the center of religious awe in the world.)

**The rabbis said:** Moriah means the place where incense would be offered (the Temple Mount in Jerusalem).  
Moriah = MOR/Myrrh (a spice used in incense).  
(This is the same as you find in Song of Songs 4:6: "I will betake me to the mount of myrrh.")

**THE PROBLEM:** Where is Moriah? (This is the only verse in which the name is used, and we know of no historical place called Moriah.)

**THE ANSWER:** Moriah = The Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

**THE METHODOLOGY:** Wordplays (and pseudo-etymologies) on the name Moriah.

**THE PROOF-TEXT:** Song of Songs 4:6 (the mount of myrrh).

**THE MESSAGE:** The Temple Mount is a unique Jewish location, the center of teaching, awe, and the national ritual.

### 2. Parables

*"When God was going to destroy Sodom, God decided to tell Abraham:  
Now the Lord had said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do ...?"  
(Gen. 18:17)*

Here is how Rabbi Joshua Ben Levi explains this verse in *Genesis Rabbah* 49:2.

This is like a king who presented an estate to his friend and later wanted to cut down five non-fruit-bearing trees from it. Said the king: "Even if I wished to cut them down from the land which was originally his-he would not refuse me. What can I lose by asking him?" And so he consulted him about it.

This is the same as the Holy One who is to be blessed saying: "I have already made a gift of this land to Abraham," as it says: *To your offspring I give this land.* (Gen. 15:18)

Now these five towns (Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim, and Zoar) were indeed in My territory, yet even if I asked him for something which was ancestrally his-he would not refuse Me. And so God consulted him.

**THE PROBLEM:** Why does God tell Abraham about the plan to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah (and the other three towns)?

**THE ANSWER:** Because they are part of a land which has been promised to Abraham's offspring. While God expects Abraham to agree, God tells him because it is the right thing to do.

**THE METHODOLOGY:** Parable-Rabbi Joshua creates the story of a king and a friend to explain the situation.

**THE PROOF-TEXT:** Gen. 15:18 (God promised this land to Abraham).

**THE MESSAGE:** Property rights are important-even for God.

### 3. Analysis

*The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: "This month shall mark for you the beginning of months...."*(Exod. 12:1-2)

Why did God speak to Moses and to Aaron? Because the consecration of a new month must be performed by three witnesses. When God wished to consecrate the month, God said to Moses and Aaron: "You and I will consecrate the month." (Exodus Rabbah 15:20)

**THE PROBLEM:** Why does God teach this mitzvah to both Aaron and Moses and not just to Moses (like most mitzvot)?

**THE ANSWER:** Because it takes three witnesses to start a new month.

**THE METHODOLOGY:** Analysis: The author of this midrash took a rule he knew and, through a process of reasoning, applied it to the situation.

**THE PROOF-TEXT:** None-but it does imply knowledge of a rule found in Mishnah about Rosh Chodesh (\* In the Mishnah, Rosh Chodesh I:1-2, we are taught about the procedure for starting a new month. Before the Sanhedrin could declare a new month, at least

three witnesses who had seen the new moon had to present themselves in Jerusalem and give testimony.)

**THE MESSAGE:** Both God and people share in the maintenance of the Jewish calendar.

#### 4. Connections

*At Moses' first encounter with God at the burning bush, God tells him:  
"I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians...." (Exod. 3:8)*

Here is how this verse is explained in Exodus Rabbah 3:3.

*God said to Moses: "I promised their ancestor Jacob: *I Myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I Myself will bring you back*, and now I have come here to take his children, as I promised their father Jacob." (Gen. 46:4)*

*Now the cry of the Israelites has reached Me. (Exod. 3:9)*

Up to now, they have been crying out - but it has not reached Me - because the time set for their redemption had not passed. I did tell Abraham: "*And they shall be enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years.*" (Gen. 15:13) Now the time has passed: "*Come, I will send you to Pharaoh.*" (Exod. 3:10)

**THE PROBLEM:** Why does God choose this moment to hear Israel's cry after having ignored it for years?

**THE ANSWER:** The time fixed for slavery in Egypt wasn't up till now.

**THE METHODOLOGY:** Connecting verses-The author uses promises made to Jacob and Abraham to explain God's conversation with Moses. (The author also writes some additional dialogue for God.)

**THE PROOF-TEXT:** Gen. 46:4-God's promise to Jacob; and Gen. 15:13-God's promise to Abraham.

**THE MESSAGE:** God keeps promises Israel's fate is secure-even when things seem darkest.

#### 5. Insertions

*And God blessed the seventh day.... (Gen. 2:3)*

Here is what is done with that verse in Genesis Rabbah 11:6.

Why did God bless the seventh day?

Rabbi Berekiah said: Because it has no mate. Sunday has Monday, Tuesday has Wednesday, and Thursday has Friday, but Shabbat has no partner.

Rabbi Simeon Bar Yohai taught: Shabbat pleaded to the Holy One blessed be He: "All the other days have a partner-but I have no partner!" God answered: "The community of Israel is your partner."  
When Israel stood at Mt. Sinai, God said to them: "Remember what I said to Shabbat-that the community of Israel is your partner-So `Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy.' " (Exod. 20:8)

**THE PROBLEM:** Why does God bless the seventh day?

**THE ANSWER:** The sabbath day is special.

**THE METHODOLOGY:** Insertions-Rabbi Simeon Bar Yohai creates a dialogue between Shabbat and God and then connects it to an original dialogue between God and Israel.

**THE PROOF-TEXT:** Exod. 20:8. This commandment is to remind Israel of their special relationship with Shabbat.

**THE MESSAGE:** Israel has a special relationship with Shabbat.

## #4 Searching for Meaning in Midrash: WHAT IS MIDRASH?

By Michael Katz and Gershon Schwartz (p. 9-12)

The word Midrash derives from the Hebrew root *d-r-sh*, which means "to search," "to examine," or "to investigate." Midrash can refer to several things:

- the literary techniques used by the Rabbis to search the Bible for hidden or deeper meaning (wordplays and gematria [Hebrew numerology] are just two of the many methods of Midrash utilized by the Rabbis);
- the literary product that resulted from such readings and interpretations (the Rabbi began his sermon by quoting Rabbi Avdimi's Midrash on the giving of the Torah);
- a collection of such interpretations (Midrash Shir HaShirim Rabbah is a book containing Rabbinic commentaries on the biblical Song of Songs).

The term *D'rash* (from the same Hebrew root) is often used—as it is in this book to denote a short interpretive piece that is based on a sacred text.

In one sense, the process of Midrash began the very first time the Torah was read. In the legal sections, there were always questions about just exactly what the text meant and what was expected of the listener or reader. In the Ten Commandments, for example, we are told "You shall not murder." At first, that law seems pretty clear. But upon further reflection, we realize that many questions might arise: Is self-defense included in the prohibition? Is suicide? What about warfare? The Rabbinic discussions and answers to such legal questions constitute what is known as **Midrash Halakhah**.

In the narrative portions of the Bible, on the other hand, there was always a curiosity about what was left out of the story. A classic case is the story of Abraham's life, which begins in the Book of Genesis when he was seventy-five years old. We can't help but wonder about his childhood, youth, and middle age, and about how he came to be the person who influenced so much of world religion. The famous tale of how a young Abraham smashed the idols in his father's shop (brought as a Midrash text in this volume) is a response to the desire of the reader to have more information. In addition, Midrash often attempts to smooth over a textual oddity or harmonize contradictory texts. These stories passed down by the Rabbis are known as **Midrash Aggadah**.

The process of interpretation, which culminates in the midrashic literature, begins in the Bible itself. The entire Book of Deuteronomy is really an explication of the Genesis-Numbers narrative.

## HOW THE RABBIS READ THE BIBLE AND CREATED MIDRASH

A fundamentalist assumes that biblical text has one meaning for all times and all situations. But the **Rabbis who wrote Midrash were not fundamentalists**. They acknowledged that the Bible as sacred text, is a living document. It can have different meanings in different contexts. One Rabbi can give an interpretation, his Midrash on a verse, and another Rabbi, in the exact same time and place can say, in effect, "Here's another possible meaning of this sacred Scripture." And later generations would look not only at the biblical text but also at these interpretations; these later teachers would write their own midrashim, understanding the Bible in the light of their times, their backgrounds, their needs.

Often, the Rabbis who wrote these interpretations were responding to the particular challenges of their age. The Jews who lived in Israel during the classic age of Midrash experienced foreign occupation, the loss of the Temple, the flourishing of Christianity, and finally the advent of Islam. They needed to understand why these things happened to them as a nation. They needed to be reassured that there was a bright future awaiting them as a people. They needed to know if the promises of God and if the words of the Torah were still meaningful and relevant. Midrash makes the biblical text applicable to the issues of the day. The Bible is not a frozen document but a living, breathing work.

The Rabbis also used Midrash to introduce new concepts into Judaism, which itself was developing during the same time that these interpretations were being written. (The Bible, read literally, does not have a concept of "soul"; however, the Rabbis used Midrash to find the basis for a soul in certain verses.) This creative reading allowed Rabbinic Judaism to expand and grow. Similarly, reinterpretations of sacred texts through Midrash provided comfort and consolation as well as a "revised" philosophy of Judaism that would make sense of the cataclysm - the destruction of the Temple that Jews had only recently experienced.

The basic assumption of the Rabbis was that the Torah was a sacred text, originating from God. The implication of this **assumption was that there is more to the Bible than initially meets the eye**. In each sentence, word, and letter, there was either a direct message from or an opportunity for the Rabbi to elucidate what God wanted from the Jewish people. Therefore, the text couldn't just be read; it had to be **studied**. It could not be perused; it had to be **deciphered**. Everything about it was of ultimate significance.

Scholars of the Midrash speak of two main methodologies used by the Rabbis: **creative philology** (the study of language and texts) and **creative historiography** (the study of history and narrative). First and foremost was the attention that the Rabbis paid to the language. Midrashic methodology included the following techniques, which will be found in the passages included in this book:

- Attention to unusual spellings: *maleh*, "complete," and *haser*, "missing," where a *vav* or a *yod* might be included or left out.
- Puns, when a word could change meaning by minor changes in a vowel or consonant. The literal interpretation of a word instead of its usual, idiomatic meaning.
- The presence of superfluous words that were believed to have been included in order to transmit additional messages.

- The doubling of words- -a common Hebrew form- seen by the Rabbis as signaling a message.
- Notarikon, where a word was understood as an abbreviation of two or more other words.
- Gematria, whereby the numerical sum of a word's letters either added up to a significant quantity or equaled another word of the same numerical sum.
- Gezeira Shava, in which two distinct stories shared the same word or phrase, and elements of the first were applied to the second.
- The etymology of names, which offered hints about a person's character.
- The juxtaposition of sections, not considered coincidental or meaningless, which was seen as planned and significant.

These and many other techniques were formalized by the Rabbis in various lists of middot, "characteristics" or principles of interpretation. Among the most famous are the Thirteen Middot of Rabbi Yishmael (which became a part of the daily Shaharit liturgy).

In addition to the detailed concern with the language, the Rabbis also employed other methodologies in analyzing Bible stories and creating the Midrash texts that have come down to us:

- Logic, interpretations created through reasoning. A classic example of the use of logic is the *kal va-homer*, where a law or a situation applied in a "light" case was also applied to a "serious" case. [This is often referred to as *kal va-homer*, though *kal va-homer* is the more correct reading.]
  - The resolution of contradictions within a story or between stories (often accomplished by limiting the situations in which the cases applied).
  - The Bible as a paradigm of history, where the deeds of the ancestors are a sign regarding the actions of their descendants. *masei avot siman l'banim*
- The use of biblical stories to mask comments on politics and current events. The desire to fill in missing details of biblical stories.
- And perhaps most significant for the creation of midrashic narratives was the aversion to anonymity. The Rabbis tried to identify unnamed figures in the Bible and fill in missing background information.

We also find in midrashic texts:

- Folk wisdom, including proverbs and parables.
- Case studies; incidents that actually occurred were used as precedents.
- Fauna and flora-, as the source of an ethical lesson.
- Imitatio Dei (imitation of the divine), with God serving as a role model for human behavior.
- Apologetics, in which stories of interactions with non-Jews were a basis for arguing for Judaism's superiority over other religions.
- Ethical lessons derived from legal details, and legal details derived from narrative sections.

## The Hammer on Rock Model of Midrash By Gershon Schwartz and Michael Katz

TEXT - Midrash Sanhedrin 34a (p. 20-22)

One biblical verse may have many meanings, but a single meaning does not emerge from several biblical verses. In the School of Rabbi Yishmael it was taught: "... like a hammer that shatters rock' (Jeremiah 23:29). Just as a hammer splits [a rock] into many pieces, so will one verse have many meanings."

(Citations to the Midrash texts are by the hook of Midrash, chapter, and-following a comma -section. [In this case, the Midrash is quoted from the Talmud, which is cited by tractate, page, and side a or b of the page]. Thus, *Genesis Rabbah 19:6* means that the Midrash is taken from the collection called *Genesis for Bereshit Rabbah*, chapter 19, section 6. To assist the reader, when the "Midrash Text" quotes from the "Bible Text," we have set that quote in italics.)

### CONTEXT

The passage in Sanhedrin deals with the judicial procedures in capital cases. The question is raised why the arguments for acquittal must be recorded. The answer given is that it is to make sure that two different judges, in rendering a decision, don't base the same argument on two separate biblical verses. The Talmud then states the general principle that one biblical verse may have many meanings, but a single meaning does not emerge from several biblical verses. We then learn that the school of Rabbi Yishmael derived this principle from a verse in the Book of Jeremiah.

**The P'shat**, or "contextual meaning," of the passage from Jeremiah concerns false prophets. Jeremiah, a true prophet, brings a message that God is angered by individuals who have dreams and then try to pass them off as the word of God. Dreams, as compared with the true words of the Lord, are like straw compared to grain: Straw is worthless God's word, on the other hand, is as nutritious as grain and as powerful as fire or as a hammer blow.

**In the Drash**, the "interpretive meaning," the verse has a very different sense: **The hammer blow smashes a single rock into many pieces, just as the Rabbis could deduce multiple meanings from one verse.** The Rabbis believed that the finite verses in the Bible could be interpreted and understood an almost infinite number of ways. This provided them with the flexibility to find in the Bible a lesson or teaching to cover almost every possible circumstance. The corollary, however, was that two different verses would never mean the very same thing. Thus, "You shall not steal" in Exodus 20:13 and "You shall not steal" in Leviticus 19:11 cannot both be about robbery. The Rabbis interpreted the former to be about kidnapping, the latter about the theft of property.

(In the Context section, we explain the Midrash text. It will quickly become apparent to the reader that much more than a translation is required to understand Rabbinic teachings. Midrash and Talmud almost always assume that the reader knows what the teacher is thinking. We will provide the background

material that is left out. We will also attempt to show not only what the Rabbis thought [and didn't say] but also how they thought [and the forms and functions of the midrashic process]. We shall endeavor to explain what the Rabbis said, as well as what they meant. In this section, we may give a running commentary on the Midrash text; when we quote the actual words of the text, they will appear in bold print.)

## D'RASH

Two famous passages in Rabbinic literature use rocks as a metaphor for learning. One comes from Avot de-Rabbi Natan 6 and concerns Rabbi Akiva: " One time, standing by the mouth of a well in Lydda, he inquired: ` Who hollowed out this stone?' And he was told, ` It was water falling upon it constantly, day after day.' At that, Akiva asked himself: ` Is my mind harder than this stone? I will go and study at least one section of Torah."

The second passage is the one above from the Talmud: "Just as a hammer splits [a rock] into many pieces, so will one verse have many meanings." These sayings constitute **two very different approaches to Torah**. In the first, **learning takes place over many years, one small step (or drop!) at a time. It is a slow, natural, and subtle process**. But in the second text, **learning occurs suddenly. It is swift and forceful, requiring directed strength and much energy**.

How typical of Midrash: Instead of giving us one fixed dogmatic position, it presents us with very different views of an issue, forcing us to examine our own beliefs and opinions and challenging us to weigh in on one side or the other of the argument.

And how perceptive of the Rabbis to recognize that truth is to be found in many places and in many forms. Yes, learning for some people can be very slow, while for others it can be very swift. It can come easily, or it can come with great difficulty. Sometimes it is like the dripping of water on a stone, other times like the crashing of a hammer on a rock.

(In the D'rash section we attempt to find our own contemporary meaning in the ancient texts of The -Rabbis. Here we will bring stories, brief sermons, and me citations that are inspired by a word, a phrase, or an idea found in the Midrash. The thoughts in this section are very subjective pieces based in one way or another on the Midrash. We do not claim to speak for the Rabbis, or for the Midrash; in this section we speak only for ourselves, sharing how the Midrash inspires or challenges us today. We present our D'rashot not to say "This is what the Rabbis would have taught" but rather "This is what it means to us." Ultimately, we want the reader to create his or her own D'rashot. We believe that the key question when reading the Midrash is always: "What does this text mean to me?")

## *Davar Acher* - ANOTHER D'RASH

**A hammer can be either a tool for building or a weapon for destroying**. The famous American folk song "If I had a Hammer" hints at the dual nature the object. "I'd hammer out justice" can refer to the (hammer-like) *gave*], wielded by a judge as she

presides over a courtroom and tries to redress wrongs and punish crimes. But that is followed by the line "I'd hammer out warning." Here, perhaps, we see a threat of violence. "No justice, no peace! as become a contemporary catchphrase of those ready-to-take

to the streets and commit acts of civil disobedience, and of others willing to riot and burn down a city that denies them what they believe is due them.

*Were the Rabbis aware of the dual nature of the hammer when they used it as a metaphor for learning Torah? Perhaps they were. By taking a hammer to the words of Torah, we might destroy the original shape of the "stone" and the meaning of the words. But the Rabbis were apparently willing to allow that, so long as we then used the pieces of the original to make something new. 'To smash the tablets of stone and then turn one's back on them is heretical. But to break the rock and then fashion something Jewish out of the raw material - that is called Midrash.*

(One of the most frequently found phrases in the Midrash is *davar aher*, "another interpretation." It is used when the Rabbis differ over the meaning of a word or a story, and have a second, or a third, or a fourth suggestion as to what the biblical text means. We have adopted that convention in this book. For each of the entries, following the D'rash, there will be "Another D'rash." At times, this section will expand on the first D'rash. At other times, this second interpretation will disagree with the first D'rash. "Another D'rash" may carry the understanding to a totally different plane. We ask our readers not merely to accept the interpretations we have presented, but to use our D'rashot as the impetus for creating their own. In doing so, we wish to emphasize the unending work that every serious reader of Midrash must be engaged in: the search for meaning.)

## IS THERE STILL MIDRASH TODAY? By Michael Katz

If we define Midrash as "homiletic or legal interpretations of the Bible," that is, interpretive readings of sacred text, then the process of Midrash certainly continues today - in two formats. There are contemporary commentaries written on the Bible, often reflecting the needs and interests of the day. And secular culture commonly adapts religious themes for artistic purposes.

As an example of the first the **rabbi's sermon** given in the modern synagogue is often a Midrash-like exposition on the week's Torah reading; by attempting to relate Torah to life today, the sermon is the example par excellence of contemporary Midrash. It is not uncommon for a contemporary rabbi to hold an ancient midrashic text in one hand, and a news clipping from the daily paper in the other, as he or she tries to make sense out of the present by searching for meaning in the past.

Works like Ellen Frankel's *The Five Books of Miriam* are another prime example. This is a collection of modern midrashic statements put into the mouths of women to answer the question "What did women then, and what do women now, make of the events in this chapter?" Here is one such selection from *The Five Books of Miriam*:

**OUR DAUGHTERS ASK:** Why does Jethro advise Moses to appoint only men to help him share the onerous burden of leadership? As it is written: "SEEK OUT CAPABLE MEN WHO FEAR GOD, TRUSTWORTHY MEN WHO SPURN ILL-GOTTEN GAIN" (Exodus 18:21). We can't believe that there weren't capable, God-fearing women among the people.

**THE SAGES IN OUR OWN TIME ANSWER:** We must be careful not to judge Jethro by the standards of twentieth-century Western democracy. After all, in his time and place, women generally did not occupy such leadership roles.

**LILITH THE REBEL COUNTERS:** But we can hold today's Jethros in our own communities to such standards! Especially since the burdens of leadership have not gotten any lighter- and since capable, God-fearing, trustworthy women now stand ready to share them.

The Five Books that were once attributed to Moses have now been expanded to include the insights of all of our Miriams as well.

Midrash can be "done" by Christians, as well as by Jews, though the process would have a different name and would draw on a different set of techniques and values, since "Midrash" is a uniquely Jewish product. In Deuteronomy, chapters 31-34, Moses gives his final farewell to the Israelite nation. Their leader tells them that although he will die on this side of the Jordan, they will get to the land that God has promised them. God instructs Moses to go to the top of a mountain, to see the land that the Israelites will soon enter but that he will not. Moses' final speeches are poignant and moving: The greatest leader will see his goal accomplished by others, yet he himself will not arrive there.

Compare these chapters in Deuteronomy to the famous "**I See the Promised Land**" speech by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., given on April 3, 1968:

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead: But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

By ending with a stirring message about seeing the Promised Land from the mountaintop, the Reverend Dr. King evoked images of Moses entering the land. This Midrash turned out to be prophetic, for King was assassinated the very next day.

One of the oldest collections of Midrash, if not the oldest, is the **Passover Haggadah**. 'The process of Midrash on the Exodus story remains alive and we in modern hag-gadot. There are literally hundreds of Haggadah interpretations, each giving its own spin on the verses from Exodus- an archaeological Haggadah, a feminist version, an Israeli version that focuses on the fulfillment of God's promise to redeem us.

Yet, the process of interpreting the Bible and of writing Midrash, especially on the Exodus theme, goes well beyond these works. In the biblical account, we are told that Moses was placed in a basket on the Nile by his mother, that Moses' sister watched as the daughter of Pharaoh came to bathe in the Nile and saw the basket:

*Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter: "Shall I go and get you a Hebrew nurse to suckle the child for you?" And Pharaoh's daughter answered, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother. And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will pay your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed it. When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, who made him her son. She named him Moses, explaining, "I drew him out of the water."*

*Some time after that, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his kinsfolk and witnessed their labors. (Exodus 2:7-10)*

The Bible does not tell us how Moses finds out he is a Hebrew, only that "he went out to his kinsfolk." The few details in the biblical story led to many midrashic interpretations, including those in the 1998 movie *The Prince of Egypt*. This is from the story line of *The Prince of Egypt*:

That night as Moses returns to his room, he discovers that Tziporah has escaped. Intrigued by the rebellious girl, he follows her through the Hebrew settlement of Goshen where he comes upon his true siblings, Miriam and Aaron. Believing that Moses has returned to help them, Miriam reveals to Moses the truth about his identity, that he is the son of a Hebrew slave. Shocked and dismayed, Moses refuses to believe her and flees back to the palace. That night he has a nightmare about the slaughter of the newborn Hebrews many years ago.

The movie's authors and producers added many details to the terse biblical narrative. They have Tziporah, Moses' future wife, meeting him in Egypt, where in the biblical account he meets her later, in Midian. The Bible does not tell us exactly how Moses found out he is a Hebrew, while in the movie, "Miriam reveals to Moses the truth about his identity, that he is the son of a Hebrew slave." These are plausible answers to questions about the Exodus story. Yet, they-as well as much of the Prince of Egypt animated feature-are a Midrash, filling in the holes for those curious about what exactly took place. And if we compare Jeffrey Katzenberg's Midrash in *The Prince of Egypt* to Cecil B. De Mille's in *The Ten Commandments* we have an understanding of the distinct approaches of different interpreters of the same text - one reflecting the sensibilities of America in the 1950s, the other of an American Jew at the end of the twentieth century.

The process of Midrash can also be seen in art, music, and literature. **Chagall's paintings** are often modern expressions of traditional themes. The spiritual hymn "*Let My People Go*" took a well-known phrase from the Bible, one that Moses directed to Pharaoh, and reframed it as referring to blacks talking to Southern slave owners.

Let's look at a modern Midrash on Ecclesiastes, chapter 3. Here is a translation of verses 1 to 8 of that chapter:

*To everything there is a season,  
And a time for every purpose under heaven: A time for being born and a time for dying,  
A time for planting and a time for uprooting the planted; A time for slaying and a time for healing;  
A time for tearing down and a time for building up; A time for weeping and a time for laughing,  
A time for wailing and a time for dancing;  
A time for throwing stones and a time for gathering stones, A time for embracing and a time for shunning embraces; A time for seeking and a time for losing,  
A time for keeping and a time for discarding; A time for ripping and a time for sewing,  
A time for silence and a time for speaking; A time for loving and a time for hating; A time for war and a time for peace.*

The 1960s hit "**Turn, Turn, Turn**," sung by the Byrds and written by folk singer **Pete Seeger**, begins as a fairly straightforward musical presentation of the Bible text.

Chorus:

To everything, turn, turn, turn, There is season, turn, turn, turn,  
And a time for every purpose under heaven.  
A time to be born, a time to die, A time to plant, a time to reap,  
A time to kill, a time to heal, A time to laugh, a time to weep.

## Appendices

### **The Slayers Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory by Susan A. Handelman**

The most important contribution of the Jews to Western culture was the concept of the **divine text**, a book whose contents and their interpretation were the key to knowing ultimate reality. In the West, those thinkers who have meditated on the problems of the text have always done so within the context of the Biblical tradition, or in reaction to it.

The history of interpretation, however, has been equally determined by the schism between Jews and Christians precisely over the issue of proper interpretation of the text. Christianity claimed that it had the final and validating interpretation of the now "Old" Testament text. The word literally became incarnate. [Hence the best interpretation of an Old Testament theme is to see it as the foreshadowing of the later events of Jesus' life or as an allegory pointing beyond the text toward a metaphysical principle like the Trinity]. Instead of the ceaseless play of interpretation, the Church Fathers needed to articulate dogma, and did not tolerate plurality and difference lightly. Scripture remained, however, a basis for proofs of the new messiah.

The Rabbinic tradition, by contrast, based itself, on the principles of multiple meaning and endless interpretability, maintaining that interpretation and text were not only inseparable, but that interpretation - as opposed to incarnation - was the central divine act. (page xiv) [Hence God is a speaker whose creates by words and gives mitzvot as Divine words and gives a written set of ten words on tablets and commands the reading of text which is the covenant with God and Israel. Interpretation of a text refers to other texts, intertextuality, rather than beyond the text. No text has only one reference but multiple ones. There is no Aristotelian law of contradiction that forbids that a text or a Divine utterance have only one consistent meaning, rather the Torah produces infinite messages each time it is read]

#### **Rabbinic Thought: The Divinity of the Text (p.27 - 30)**

With the deceptively simple words "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," the Hebrew Bible begins. In fact, however, this statement was (long before Derrida) a supreme challenge to the entire classical tradition of Western metaphysics: to assert that matter was not eternal, that the world had a temporal origin, that substance came into being through divine fiat, indeed through divine speech ("And God said, 'Let there be . . . '") threatened the foundations of Greek ontology. As Hans Jonas puts it:

There was an anti-metaphysical agent in the very nature of the Biblical position that led to the erosion of classical metaphysics, and changed the whole character of philosophy. . . . The Biblical doctrine pitted contingency against necessity, particularity against universality, will against intellect. It secured a place for the contingent within philosophy, against the latter's original bias.

If the world was created through the arbitrary will of God, then it was contingent and had no necessary existence. This meant, furthermore, that there were no necessary *archai* (axioms), inherent in the nature of things, upon which one could construct logically necessary proofs in sound Aristotelian fashion. Whereas Aristotle's "demonstrative" or "truly scientific" reasoning depended on the unquestioning acceptance of certain necessary premises ... True knowledge is of universals, not particulars.

In the Biblical view, however, all of creation was contingent, including all premises. Nothing was necessary: there were no natural laws that were logically deducible or rationally self-evident, and no unquestioned principles that formed the basis of reality.\* Everything could have been otherwise; even reason itself was not necessary. An important consequence of this perspective was that reason, too, became subject to relentless probing in a way which was anathema to the Greeks. Perhaps the relentless skepticism of the Rabbis - manifested in the constant search for alternative explanations, an intense scrutiny of the most seemingly insignificant and mundane details, and the dialectical twists and turns of Rabbinic thought can be viewed in part as a direct philosophic expression of creationist doctrine. (And, of course, it was applied to that which superseded nature's place in Greek thought: the divine speech, the Biblical text itself.)

Jonas points out that the divorce between mind and nature in the Biblical doctrine of creation was effected by a separation between God and the world which also greatly diminished the status of nature. The hierarchical great chain of being was thereby also demolished. If all things were contingent, and must constantly be recreated from nothingness, all were then ontologically equal. Moreover, individual, particular existence now assumed supreme importance, for it was only God's constant creation and supervision of every particular thing that sustained and continually called it forth from nothingness. The universal was demoted, and the particular given primacy, in direct opposition to the status they had been allotted in Greek philosophy.

Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (1981), writes: "An essential aim of the innovative technique of fiction worked out by the ancient Hebrew writers was to produce a certain indeterminacy of meaning, especially in regard to motive, moral character, and psychology. . . . **Meaning**, perhaps for the first time in narrative literature, was conceived as a **process, requiring continual revision** - both in the ordinary sense and in the etymological sense of seeing - again -- continual suspension of judgment, weighing of multiple possibilities, brooding over gaps in the information provided" (p. 12).

## The Bible and the Greeks: Erich Auerbach's "Odysseus' Scar"

In literary criticism, one of the most famous discussions of the contrast between Greek and Hebraic conceptions of reality is Erich Auerbach's classic essay, "Odysseus' Scar." Auerbach's comparison of the Bible and Homer elucidates the way in which the philosophic differences Jonas points out are reflected in narrative structures.

Auerbach perceives, first of all, that the basic impulse of the Homeric style is "to represent phenomena in a fully externalized form, visible and palpable in all their parts, and completely fixed in their spatial and temporal relations . . . nothing must remain hidden and unexpressed." In Homer, everything takes place in a foreground in an absolute temporal present which is uniformly illuminated. By contrast, in Biblical narrative, such as the story of the sacrifice of Isaac, everything is indeterminate and contingent; time and space are undetermined, motives and purposes are unexpressed, and only what is minimally necessary for the narrative to proceed is externalized while the rest is left in obscurity. The account seems fragmentary, or in Auerbach's apt phrase, "fraught with background," full of lacunae. Speech here hides as much as it externalizes, and the narrative is entangled in layers of history, not at all entirely immersed in the present.

In Homer, psychic complexity is expressed through the alternation of emotional states, whereas in the Bible, consciousness extends into multi-layered depths, which simultaneously exist and conflict. In Homer, there is no concealment, no secret hidden meaning, although later Greek allegorists tried to read him in this fashion. In Auerbach's felicitous words: "Homer can be analyzed ... but he cannot be interpreted." The Biblical text is oriented not towards "realism," but towards "truth." "Far from seeking, like Homer, merely to make us forget our own reality for a few hours, it seeks to overcome our reality: we are to fit our own life into its words, feel ourselves to be elements in its structure of universal history.", The Biblical narrative is not meant to "represent" simple reality or merely tell a story. It is intentionally mysterious, demanding subtle interpretation, imbedding doctrines within itself which are inextricably connected with the physical aspect of the narrative.\* Indeed, Auerbach continues, the Biblical narrative claims an absolute authority which subsumes our own reality and everything that happens in our own world. The Homeric poems, on the other hand, are set in a particular space and time; events which come before and after them are not dependent upon them. But the Biblical narrative claims that it is the structure into which all of history fits, and everything that is known about the world becomes part of its sequence of events. Moreover, by interpretive extension, all new facts become fitted into its account. Hence, in the Hebraic view, as Auerbach perceives, "interpretation in a determined direction becomes a general method of comprehending reality." And because of the text's claim to absolute authority, the method of interpretation spread to other non-Jewish traditions.

It is significant that Auerbach chose the essay "Odysseus' Scar" to begin his masterwork subtitled "The Representation of Reality in Western Literature." For we might say that the contrast between the Bible and Homer signifies two basic, though opposite, types of conceiving the world- and the word. In the contingent world of Hebrew thought, one must not look to nature for ultimate reality, but to the divine creative word which simultaneously reveals and conceals the hidden God, and He is not to

be identified with nature, or any of its forms. The text claims an absolute authority in Hebraic thought which it could not possibly possess for the Greeks.

While it is true that Homer also became a religious text for the Greeks, Saul Lieberman shows that copies of Homer were handled with comparative levity! Certain verses of Homer, for example, were eliminated, and corrections and emendations were made that have no parallel whatsoever in Rabbinic exegesis.

According to Dilthey, systematic exegesis in Greece arose out of the requirements of the educational system. To interpret Homer was originally a pastime for the intelligentsia. Exegesis acquired a more solid foundation with the rise of rhetoric among the Sophists, and of course with Aristotle's elaboration of the principles of literary composition, and with his *Rhetorica*. The Alexandrian grammarians and especially the Stoics deepened the process of interpretation, the latter by introducing the allegorical interpretation of Homer. They sought to read purely philosophical world views into his narratives. Allegory, of course, became a predominant mode of Christian Bible interpretation for a variety of reasons.

For the Greeks, Homer was an inspired text, but never attained the all-embracing authority that Scripture had for the Jews. The Rabbinic relation to the text was fundamentally different.

### **The difference between the Greek *onoma* and the Hebrew *davar*.**

What Auerbach describes as a movement in the Homeric narrative towards fully illuminated, externalized form, toward realistic visibility, may be seen to be a **sign which points beyond itself** towards the full vision of the thing itself. The Biblical text, however, points not outwards towards images and forms, but inwards towards itself, its own network of relations, of verbal and temporal ambiguities. It calls for its own decipherment, not for a movement away from itself towards vision or abstraction; the word leads inwards into itself, not outwards towards the "thing." What is required is that one "listen" to or read it more intently. The Hebrew term for word, *davar*, is also the term for thing.

Auerbach's perception of the Biblical text as fragmentary and obscure agrees well with the Rabbinic doctrine that the "Written Torah" (i.e., the Bible) is only a part of the total revelation of the divine word. According to the Rabbinic view, the written Scriptures are intentionally incomplete and are meant to be accompanied and supplemented by the oral Torah, simultaneously given to Moses; this oral law explains, elaborates, and interprets the obscurities and ambiguities of the written text. The text and its interpretation, then, are not seen as two separate entities, but as twin aspects of the same revelation.

As Auerbach noted, the Biblical narrative claims an absolute authority that subsumes our reality, and we are to fit ourselves into its structure of universal history; all new facts become fitted into its account. The text is only superficially a description of the past.

## Spatial versus Temporal (p. 36-37)

Although the characterization of the contrast between Greek and Hebrew thought as **spatial versus temporal** is too facile, it is worth examining the idea somewhat further. Space is the predominant mode of thought for us, functioning somewhat like a vast container holding everything together. For the Hebrews, time plays this role and consciousness is the great container of life. Furthermore, the unity of time consciousness is not divisible. Any event is a coherent whole. Again, melody is a most accurate representation of this concept. In melody, past, present, and future are simultaneously bound together in rhythmic alternation and an indivisible whole. Modern literature has many parallels to this type of time consciousness, most obviously in the stream-of-consciousness technique.

In temporal consciousness, events are not things, but abiding facts, and historical events are indestructible.

**"The consequences of events can be altered, but the events themselves can never be altered. They are the permanent stock of a people's life. The difference between past and present is less important than the qualitative distinction between events. A decisive event of antiquity can balance many current events in evaluation of the present."**

(One need not strain too hard to see the relation of psychoanalysis to the kind of temporal consciousness described as Hebraic. Past events are continuously present in the unconscious, the past indeed is indestructible, and its consequences subsume the present.)

The space-time polarity may be compared to the distinction between Greek and Hebrew thought in terms of **seeing and hearing**. The spatial is what is seen; time is a function of inner hearing. Inevitably, **the Jews are the people of history, of time-wanderers in space, exiled from place, but rooted in time, a time in which linear chronology is overcome by contemporaneity**. This capacity for experiencing contemporaneity with the action under discussion will be important for understanding Rabbinic hermeneutics and its seeming anachronisms. Contemporaneity is a kind of psychological time with its own laws: "Strict contemporaneity is therefore the same as psychic identity. Two psychological contents coalesce into one. . . . It corresponds to the geometric congruence of Greek thought which expresses the spatial identity of two quantities." The multifarious patterns of identity in Rabbinic interpretation could be seen in this light. In fact, it is one of the fundamental principles of Scriptural interpretation that "There is no chronological sequence in Scripture" (Pesachim 6b). The Biblical text, that is, is not considered to be in temporal order. Events which happened earlier are often placed after events which transpired later, and are interpreted accordingly. The Greek present is defined by the place where the action takes place, and we are there as spectators and witnesses. The Hebrew present, however, is fluid, containing both past and future simultaneously." One can see, therefore, how multiple meanings could be derived from and are inherent in every event, for every event is full of reverberations, references, and patterns of identity that can be infinitely extended. In the Christian reading of the Biblical text, though, events are seen on a sequential time line, as predictive of the fulfillment that would later come with Jesus: they attain their meaning as signs pointing towards him. This view of the text uses a more Greek sense of time.

## Midrash (p. 66-67)

This openness to hypotheses, to all aspects of a problem, this relativization of generalization and conclusion, and this search for alternative explanations, all lead to the multiplicity of interpretation and diversity of opinion found in Rabbinic thought. So far, we have discussed the rules for halachic or legalistic interpretation. Many of the restrictions applied to these rules were necessary in order to arrive at authoritative decisions for practical situations; they did not apply, however, to the interpretation of the nonlegal aspects of Scripture. And here, especially, interpretive play flourishes.

Since the aggadah is not concerned with halachic inference, nor is there any practical need for a determinative opinion, multiple meaning and proliferating interpretation are even more untamed. As usual, though, the Rabbis had to justify this interpretive multiplicity through appeal to the Text. The principle that one verse of Scripture may have many meanings was deduced from the verse in Ps. 62:12, "*Once has God spoken, twice have I heard this.*" Upon citing this verse, the Talmud goes on to explain, "This was in accord with the school of R. Ishmael which taught that the verse 'Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces' [Jer. 23:29] means that **just as the hammer splits the rock into many fragments, so may one verse be split into many meanings**" (Sanh. 34a): As another source has it, each word has at least seventy meanings. R. Akiba and "seventy" in Rabbinic usage is an epithet for "an endless number." The Midrash Aggadah, as finally collected, often follows a format of extracting verse-by-verse sections from the Scripture, and then compiling all manner of possible interpretation together, the only connective link between them being the words "Another Interpretation."

## Freud and Interpretation (p. 133, 146-152)

We have attached no less importance in interpreting dreams to every shade of the form of words in which they were laid before us. . . . In short, we treated as Holy Writ what previous writers have regarded as an arbitrary improvisation. . . .

-Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*

One of the main themes of psychoanalysis is the recovery of the past, reconstruction of lost fragments (as in so many of Freud's archeological metaphors), and reappropriation of one's life history. What the analyst reconstructs, the patient remembers, and comes to accept as his own life history, restoring the link between himself and his past by overcoming his resistance and repression.

Gerard Radnitzky has written: "It is generally agreed that Freud made us see ...dreams, and neurotic behavior as "meaningful" by introducing a new way of studying these phenomena which is primarily **hermeneutic.**"

Freud's innovative hermeneutic was a particularly Judaic one. ...For Aristotle, interpretation had to do with declarative, logical discourse, not with rhetoric and poetics. Interpretation was concerned with the truth or falsity of logical propositions, not with the multiple meanings of semantics. The univocity of meaning, and the concept of hermeneutics as ascertaining the truth or falsehood of a logic of oppositions, were connected to the Christian logos. In the Jewish concept of interpretation, in contrast to the Greco-Christian tradition, **interpretation is multivocal, indeterminate, rhetorical and poetic**, as well as logical (as is Freud's), concerned with the affirmation of truth or falsehood in terms of uncovering deeper meanings. Instead of a logic of oppositions, the Talmud, we saw, uses a dialectical model of reasoning that presents and encourages opposing opinions. Often the pattern is to record a mishnah, follow it with the Gemara's debate and discussion analyzing the mishnah, then cite another, unrecorded, text, analyze it and subject it to opposing statements. The connections between arguments, citations, and traditions may take the discussion seemingly far from its original subject and expand into explanations of other statements, which in turn may invoke aggadic interpolations, stories, proverbs, etc. before the original halachic question is returned to.

Like a good Talmudist, Freud claims that in the dream:  
Each train of thought is almost invariably accompanied by its contradictory counterpart, linked to it by antithetical association. The different portions of this complicated structure stand, of course, in the most manifold logical relations to one another. They can represent foreground and background, digressions and illustrations, conditions, chains of evidence and counter-argument. . . **The restoration of the connections which the dream-work has destroyed is a task which has to be performed by the interpretive process."**

.... Freud's concept of the relation of the dream text to interpretation parallels the Rabbinic concept of the relation of the written to the oral Torah. The written Scripture was a product of **condensation**, a coded shorthand that needed elucidation and interpretation; externally it appeared fragmentary, disjointed, and illogical, each letter compressing many meanings hinted and implied. These meanings are latent, concealed within the text. One of **Freud's most contested assertions was that beneath the seeming fragments and illogical manifest content of the dream was a latent content, a locus of entirely rational and comprehensible dream thoughts**. All other interpreters of dreams, Freud wrote, dealt only with the manifest content:

This concept of latent content that needs to be uncovered through hermeneutical procedure, which places both Freud and the Rabbis in direct opposition to the tradition of Protestant literalism, rejects any attempt to define meaning by a reduction of the manifest to any one single latent referent.

of many thoughts in an endless interpretability. ..Freud writes:

A dream never tells us whether its elements are to be interpreted literally, or in a figurative sense, or whether they are to be connected with the material of the dream-thoughts directly or through the intermediary of some interpolated phraseology. . . . whether it is to be interpreted in a positive or negative sense (antithetical relation), whether it is to be interpreted historically, whether it is

to be interpreted symbolically, or whether its interpretation is to depend on its wording."

The interpretive process is the dream-work in reverse; the interpreter's own procedures must correspond to the procedures of the unconscious in forming and representing the dream. By the interpreter's own condensations, associations, displacements, reversals, wordplays, multiple meanings, dramatic representations, etc., he can uncover the dream thoughts, and "construct" the meaning, a meaning which was latent in and not arbitrarily read into the dream- and that precisely was the technique of the Rabbis as well.

And like the Rabbis, Freud insisted that he was not creating new meanings, only uncovering, like an archaeologist, what lay buried beneath. Everything is connected under the surface; the interpreter's job is to reveal, elucidate, and construct for conscious awareness those hidden unities that contain a core of definite historical truth.

Interpretation is not, in the Aristotelian sense, the distinguishing of truth from falsehood, but the **relationship of hidden to shown**: not appearance to reality, but **manifest to latent**. The idiom is disguise, displacement, censorship of the superego. A dream cannot be true or false, but can only have a more or less deep meaning. **Everything that logical consciousness rejects as nonsensical, useless, disconnected, contradictory, and impossible has, in fact, a meaning**; and to say that dreams indeed have a meaning, Freud recognized, put him in opposition to every ruling theory. As Paul Ricoeur puts it, **Freud was the "exegete who rediscovers the logic of the illogical kingdom."** For Freud, what looked illogical was only so (as in the case of the written Torah) because the text is truncated, lacunary, but nothing in it is arbitrary, senseless, or out of place:

The most trivial elements of a dream are indispensable to its interpretation. ... We have attached no less importance in interpreting dreams to every shade of the form of words in which they were laid down before us. And even when it happened that the text of the dream as we had it was meaningless or inadequate - we had taken this defect into account as well. In short, we have treated as Holy Writ what previous writers have regarded as an arbitrary improvisation, hurriedly patched together in the embarrassment of the moment."

Many of Freud's methods of approaching this "Holy Writ" bear striking similarity to some of the Rabbinic hermeneutic rules. Freud writes, for example, that the logical relation most favored by the mechanism of dream formation is "**the relation of similarity**, consonance, or approximation- the relation of `just as' . . .": "Parallels or instances of `just as' inherent in the material of the dream-thoughts constitute the first foundation for the construction of a dream. . . . The representation of the relation of similarity is assisted by the tendency of the dream-work towards condensation, similarity, consonance, the possession of common attributes - all these are represented in dreams by unification.""

In Rabbinic interpretation we find many corresponding principles concerning the relation and placing of words, verses, sections, or laws next to each other (*semuchin* and *hekkesh*), inferring that what is true of one is also true of the other. Moreover, we have seen in our analysis of the *kal ve-chomer* mode of argument (how much more so) an underlying logical principle of juxtaposition allowing for multiple predication; this

principle is fundamental to much of Rabbinic thought and distinguishes it from logic based on Greek ontology and reason.

... The strangeness of Rabbinic and psychoanalytic technique, especially the use of plays on words and numbers in Freud is exactly equivalent to the Rabbinic *notarikon* and *gematria*. He finds the meaningless compound word *Maistollmutz* in a woman's dream, for instance, and breaks it down by analysis into *Mais* (maize), *toll* (mad), *mannstol* (mad for men), and *Olmutz* (a town in Moravia), and derives a whole chain of thoughts and associations from each syllable. Freud calls this phenomenon "syllabic chemistry.""

In *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud calculates that in his own dream twenty-four represented his twenty-fourth birthday and coming of age, which added to his then present age of forty-three equalled sixty-seven; the number 2,467 therefore expresses his wish to be able to work another twenty-four years. And so Freud writes, one cannot underestimate the extent to which psychological events are determined. **There is nothing arbitrary about them.** It can be shown quite generally that if an element is left undetermined by one train of thought, its determination is immediately effected by a second one. For instance, I may try to think of a number arbitrarily. But this is impossible: the number that occurs to me will be unambiguously and necessarily determined by thoughts of mine though they may be remote from my immediate intention."

There is in Freud's world of the dream-which is the model of the psyche and of culture itself-nothing arbitrary; nor is there anything arbitrary in the world of the interpreter. Behind the irrationalities and trivialities is an all-embracing unity of meaning achieved through condensations....

For the Rabbis, while interpretation was from Sinai, "the Torah is not in heaven" but is decided in the ongoing process of debate on earth.... The holy Scripture is itself the speaking subject, speaking to men, instituting laws, shaping the norms of life and behavior, and yet at the same time an object of analysis shaped by its interpreters - for Freud, the dream as the royal road to the unconscious is the psyche speaking to men, and yet an object of and subject to their interpretations. The interpreter stands in a passive-aggressive role, engaged and detached, determined by and determining the associations and thoughts of the unconscious, which ultimately lead to the mysterious unknown, beyond reason, explanation, and understanding. Freud writes, "There is at least one spot in every dream at which it is unfathomable - a navel, as it were, that is part of its contact with the unknown."...

Psychoanalysis itself might be seen as a compromise formation between Freud the Talmudic dialectician and midrashic commentator, scrutinizer of texts, pursuer of secrets, and believer in hidden unities, and Freud the German scientist, materialist, atheist, skeptical professor, and dispassionate observer. Psychoanalysis intimately shares Freud's peculiar hybrid character, and his position as a kind of pariah in both the human and natural sciences. Perhaps only one who belonged to and felt himself to be a part of a people in exile could have transformed the hermeneutics of historical understanding from the cool philosophical abstractions of Dilthey and the Protestant nineteenth-century schools of historicism to a passionate confrontation with the inner lost and pained self and its suffering. Remember is the theme that permeates both the Bible and Jewish history. In place of what is lost . . . the Temple, the land, the glory of the nation ... is study, analysis, interpretation-and, as for Freud, no immediate grace, but only a continuing narrative.

**Rabbinic Midrash as Commentary and Story**  
from Joshua Levinson, *The Twice Told Tale*  
– *The Poetics of the Exegetical Narrative in Rabbinic Midrash*  
(summarized by the editor from the Hebrew, pp. 1-45, 99-101)

**Who Needs a Commentary Anyway?**

Frederick Jameson, the literary critic, says: the first thing that needs to be explained is not the text but **why there is any need for a commentary on the text**. The answer is that **any culture with classics from the past that have a canonical status in defining that community needs to translate them into cultural language that speaks to its contemporary generation. When there is discontinuity of culture and history that makes the original less than transparent, then the canon requires both to be retold in a new language and to be renewed with new ideas or new applications**. The retold or written version as commentary reflects a tension between its subservience to the original and its creativity, its continuity and its renewal,

Where the canon defines the community as its source of legitimacy, then commentators and adapters may seek:

- 1- when left out of the canon, to write themselves into the canon (feminist)
- 2- when a sect claims to represent the whole tradition, to reread the canon in their image (Essenes in Qumran)
- 3- when there is a conflict between a well-defined philosophic world view and the canon, to treat the canon as prefiguration or allegory for their extra textual world (Christianity or Maimonides)
- 4- when their such a total identification with the canon that there is no room to admit any gap between present and past, to reinterpret the past as if it was identical with present (some Haredi groups).

**What Good is a Story? The Genre of Narrative as Dramatic Plot**

Once the reader knows what the **genre of the text** is, then the reader has rules for how to figure out the text, for how to construct meaning, for how the progression of the text will develop.

Plot is minimally two scenes, two situations and an event that brings about a change. The relationship between the two particular situations is both **temporal succession** (after that) and **causal succession** (therefore) and it forms some **meaningful configuration**, some coherent world picture and it makes a **point**, some universalizable lesson or idea of significance to the reader.

The dramatic tension is between two situations that are similar enough to be compared and different enough to show that there was **transformation**. Usually the there is a conflict or choice.

The narrative both creates **expectations of resolution of the tension** and **yet delays** the resolution and creates tension. According to the reader response theory, the narrator expects **the reader to fill in the gaps, to predict the resolution**, based on the hints, the unsaid but eloquent silences of the narration. Then the story must have an ending which is **both surprising and yet satisfying**, both twist and a logical coherence with what came before.

A text involves an **implicit contract between reader and teller**. The reader will **invest** effort to figure out the text, to pay attention to details and structures, to try to predict the outcome and the narrator will provide the tolls that will lead to some new insight, some **point of significance**, some worthy revelation or cathartic experience. Then the reader may take a stance on what has been presented. In a narrative text the reader is promised identification with the characters leading to emotional catharsis, tension and resolution, and some generalizable insight, knowledge or lesson.

Stories have **typical conflicts and resolution**.. In Rabbinic stories many deal with:

- (1) sin and punishment, mitzvah and reward,
- (2) need or loss and search for the lost object (Rebbe Nahman's story of the lost princess) or
- (3) task, obstacle and overcoming the obstacle to fulfill the mission.

Each culture has its own master stories, its own types of hero. In Rabbinic **anthropology of the hero** there is a new concern for subjectivity that was not central to Biblical story. In Bible as Erich Auerbach argues, the narrative style does not reveal inner feelings of thoughts, but Rabbi insists on knowing how a character felt and what moral dilemmas they faced. The inner world of *kavanah* is most important both in halachic literature where the motive and intentionality determine degrees of guilt, performative acts and religious status of acts and objects. Therefore the hero must overcome not external obstacles but inner ones. "Who is *gibor*? One who conquers their urges."

In exegetical narratives the readers are not only interested in the inner world of doubts and feelings, but they themselves are deeply perplexed by what appears the lack of morality or lack of faith of the Biblical character according to their own religious standards. So **the reader's anxiety is often represented as an inner deliberation or test within the main character.**

### Story or Commentary or Both?

Three genres are typical in Second Temple and early rabbinic period:

1- **Rewritten Bible** where new old story is retold without direct reference to the original. Often it is presented as independent revelation such as the Book of Jubilees as rewritten Genesis. Sometimes it is **Reworked Bible** that uses biblical original but intersperses glosses. James Kugel has shown that many of the retellings emerge from a sensitivity to exegetical problems but the form is not exegetical.

2- **Commentary.** Midrash may be simply a commentary that quotes a canonic text, identifies a problem and allows a rabbi to make his own free interpretation, without claiming revelation or confusing the commentary on the canon with the Bible itself.

3- **Exegetical narrative, *sipur darshani*** is a **comment by creating its own story in parallel** with the Biblical story or a mini-narrative inserted into the Biblical text's gaps. It both comments and creates a new narrative, but that narrative is not meant to stand alone but to fill a gap in the text. Narrative is a new invention, a fiction, man-made, yet it emerges from a dialogue with the original text and claims to close a gap in the text in way that the original text implied or at least that unpacks potential within the text that generates new narrative extrapolations and interpolations and retellings from another perspective. On one hand the exegetical narrative **closes gaps** that make the text more plausible, more coherent both internally and in intertextually, yet on the other hand, they also create new narrative and new insights with **their own gaps** they invite more new narrative and new ways to close the gaps. Here is dialectic of closing and opening gaps.

### The Dual Narrative –The Exegetical Expectation

In the exegetical narratives there is an added source of narrative tension: how does this new narrative relate to the old one- the Bible? What is the **dialogue** between these two related yet different narratives, this twice told tale? **What is new and why is this interesting and yet how does it resolve a tension or a gap within in the old text that makes this narrative exegetical?**

As readers of the Bible we are not first readers but rereaders who need to be aroused to pay attention since we know exactly what is going to happen. Like the Bible teacher teaching parshat hashavua, the exegetical narrative asks us **to reread the Biblical story.** and to read our new narrative. We can raise moral and faith questions, we can pose *kushiot* and contradictions, but in the end we must be reconciled to God and Torah, to faith and morality. To make us look anew at the plot, the exegetical story can refocus our interest on the inner feeling and hesitations of the character. Our status like God's in knowing in advance what will happen makes us interested to see how the character who does not have foreknowledge must struggle as all human being to do to act with limited knowledge and control. One can also make us reevaluate the story by considering what could have but did not happen to upset the Biblical plot that now seems so inevitable (for example, Satan's attempt to discourage Avraham from sacrificing his son)

The exegetical narrator also offers a new narrative that fits into the old one somehow, yet does not simply fit in. We know that the new narrative must undercut the expected plot of the Bible or else there is no excitement, yet we know it must come back and reintegrate itself in the Biblical narrative which is canonical. So we read back and forth between the two related narratives, trying to follow the new one's influence on the old one and trying to see how the *darshan* is trying to change our view of the old story. In the end we will evaluate the characters from our value point of view and then the Bible or God from our value point of view and the exegetical narrator form an aesthetic-literary point of view, was our interest aroused, did we see things and feel them differently.

### **The Problem: *Pshat* or *Derash*? The author's original intent or the darshan's own idea?**

In our world we distinguish sharply between **pshat and derash**, a distinction that begins with Rashi in 11<sup>th</sup> century. The *pshat* is the original intention of the text or its objective meaning, while *derash* is subjective meaning we derive from the text or insert into the text to serve the reader's needs. With the rise of historical consciousness in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and development of historical philology as the academic approach to ancient texts, the *pshat* becomes the historic meaning of the text for its author and its first audience which is by definition different than our uncritical reading of the text as moderns living in different world of ideas and conventions who project into the text. That is *derash* whether intended or unintended unless a critical method neutralizes our subjective and contemporary perspective. According to the **hermeneutics of Hans Gadamer, commentary is translation** between that world and our world, so a commentary must retell what the original text meant and communicate that in our terms by making us aware of what is similar and different from their world. **Commentary of *pshat* is not only about the text but about overcoming our prejudices and about finding relevant analogies to our understandings.**

So we ask of the midrash – is this meant to be *pshat*? If the exegetical narrative of Hazal is a commentary loyal to the original, then how can creating a fictional story – a narrative *derash* - help get at the *pshat*? Do the *baalei midrash* even care about *pshat*?

**Yosef Heinemann** argues that the midrashic deviation from the *pshat* is a conscious effort to answer contemporary issues of the listeners to *derashot*. These are sermons whose goal is first to educate the community and only secondarily to explain the text. **The genre of commentary of the canonical ancient text is a pretext for the sermon's a message.** The conscious subtext is the historical reality of the commentator.

**Yonah Frankel** argues that the textual difficulty is pretext to introduce one's own ideas and to create one's own narrative.

But **Josh Levenson, like Daniel Boyarin**, argues:

- 1- that Rabbis like the Greco-Roman culture have **no distinction between *pshat* and *derash*, between objectively describing and imaginatively recreating**
- 2- that **all texts have gaps** that must be filled by the use of **educated imagination**, so that **the creative and the analytic**, are not radically separated. Steven Greenblatt shows that besides the **imagination at play** – composing fiction as fiction, there is the **imagination at work** trying to construct possible narratives to fill in gaps in its analytic commentaries.
- 3- that all **classics were created and read as universal**, as transcending their own historical era, so relevance and historic authenticity must be bridged
- 4- that all repetition of culture requires inevitably **change inseparable from conservation**
- 5- **Louis Althusser's understanding of psychoanalytic narratives** is a good analogy for exegetical narratives that retell the Bible. In psychoanalysis the patient tells an incoherent story in dreams and half suppressed autobiographical language about his life. Yet he also suffers symptoms that are a part of his tale that he cannot integrate. Then the psychoanalyst seeks to propose a retelling of his life story which integrates what has been said and what is performed in the patient behavior. That story is more coherent. It must translate dream symbols allegorically. It must read between the lines to explain what was left-out or repressed (intentionally at some level of consciousness). It will explicate seeming contradictions as well as gaps. It looks for the subtext or the full story or the hidden story behind the manifest story.
- 6- **James Kugel** shows that in an oral culture in particular **the written text is not primary**, so the commentator is not just explicating the written word but adding the oral tradition which is its fuller *Sitz in Leben*. **Jerome Bruner** argues that all written texts presuppose a larger oral or

living context, so the commentator on a text is responding to **the living text**, not arbitrarily adding his own gapfilling but also uncovering the implicit fuller story in which the written text is embedded.

7- The pshat/derash dichotomy of modern thinking reflects the split between two notions of **originality** – the original meaning the text in its historical authorial context versus the originality of the reader, commentator, rewriter who adds his own perspective or narrative. Modern movements like Orthodoxy seek to distinguish human additions and God's word at Sinai. They claim that all halacha is deductive result of logical rules for unpacking what the text already had in mind (Rabbi J. David Bleich). However **traditional conservative cultures** do not oppose human and divine originality, nor do they strictly distinguish the meanings from the past and the present. Rather human creativity using God's inner illumination (reason or ruach hakodesh) reveals **the so-called new hidden or implicit messages from the so-called old and closed text**. To find or make manifest or generate infinite new meanings and narratives potentially or implicitly in the original is a sign of the original Divine revelation that continues to be fruitful and to be heard. So darshanaim have not only the right to add their own twist but they have a duty to illuminate the implicit messages of the Torah from the living God and living revelation.

### The Greco-Roman Rhetorical Education

The midrashic desire to retell the biblical story is driven not only by search for **truth as commentary**, but as a **cultural practice of literary creativity** that infuses the classic with new individual creativity in an entertaining way that involves a public performance. Literary production is **fiction**, it is human poesis = making, and yet it is loyal to the canon which is historical or mythological truth that is given. In both the Greco-Roman and the rabbinic world, cultural texts whether under the genre of history or biography or tragedy are a kind of rhetoric that combines pshat and derash, exegesis and story, nonfiction and fiction, analysis and imagination.

All citizens in the classical world studied rhetoric. They distinguished degrees of rhetoric:

- a. *fabula* – impossible events that never could happen
- b. *historia* – event that did happen
- c. *argumentum* – events that might happen

School exercises (*progymnasmata*) and also public contests offered set *thema* and set genre.

- 1- *narratio* or **paraphrase**– given a traditional story whether historical or dramatic or mythological, retell it filling in details and motives and extrapolating, but do not change the basic plotline of accepted facts.
- 2- *ethopoeia* – gives a character in a moment of crisis, retell his story in first person to create psychological insight. Often a monologue or speech was written.
- 3- Homeric stories retold expansively were called **figures of silence** or **figures of the unwritten**.
- 4- Christians of 4<sup>th</sup> century turned paraphrase into **epic poetic retellings of the Bible** in poetic metre for the entertainment and edification of its previously pagan converts. Later Jewish *paytanim* wrote poetic retellings for liturgical use (Yannai, Yose) .

The success was judged by the *colores* (plot twists, motives etc) that were added, by **psychological depth** and historic **drama** and **rhetorical eloquence** (defined by well-known types). Everything must stick to the skeleton of the story and maintain plausibility and realism. Beyond the accuracy and literary form, one was judged by the poetic truths, the values praised and generalizable message. That was the goal of biography and history, not to tell like it was, not to stick to what we can prove actually was said. The general, not the particular, was most important. In that sense Aristotle preferred the truth of epic poetry to those of history, even though Greek history too sought to teach lessons and it too used imaginative rhetorical reconstructions, such as Thucydides' speeches for Pericles and Josephus' speeches written for Yair on Massada.

St. Jerome living in Bethlehem in 4<sup>th</sup> century describes derisively Rabbinic *darshanaim* recounting exegetical stories" convincing their audience that their fictions were true. After their theatrical presentations the audience clapped and cheered and spread their arms in amazement."

## Bibliography on MIDRASH - CLASSICAL AND MODERN

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Josephus - *Jewish Antiquities* and Philo retell the Biblical stories in a lively way reflecting rhetorical and political values of the Greco-Roman period  
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## Appendix:

### **The Ancient Interpreters versus the Modern Historical Critical Readers from James Kugel**

James Kugel describes them masterfully as the ancient interpreters of the post biblical period (538 BCE until today) and the modern historically critical scholarship from Spinoza on. In his judgment the Bible becomes canonized as sacred text, it becomes Bible, that is normative, as guiding source of truth and wisdom for human life, chiefly in the post Biblical period from Ezra to Spinoza and beyond for the faithful. The ancient interpreters who studied the Torah and then the Tanakh as a canonized sacred text were guided by four basic principles:

(1) **"The Bible is a book of lessons directed to readers in their own day."**

These include:

(a) model moral characters for emulation of their virtues or immoral ones, for the condemnation of their vices; moral models;

(b) prophecies of the future, especially messianic ones (such as the typological reading of Old Testament as predictions of the events described in the New Testament;

(c) binding laws whose authority goes back to God and advice on how to behave wisely"

(d) theological and philosophic truths (usually derived by allegorical readings of the Bible comparable to similar techniques applied by Greek Alexandrian scholars to Homer.

Thus the bible is always **relevant**, so its messages are helpful to guide us in the present toward the redemptive future.

(2) **The entire Bible, word for word, was communicated by God** (even when the Torah only quotes God in limited sections and even though many historical writings are not spoken directly by prophets in God's name). Therefore it has binding authority, though it is not clear who or how one can claim to its authority except by interpreting its text closely (and perhaps only with the aid of an appropriately inspired state).

(3) "The Bible is fundamentally a **cryptic** text." Hence its message is never limited to the literal meaning and often does not intend to be read literally at all. Often it has many parallel and compatible meanings on various levels - historical, moral, practical, spiritual, philosophical-theological, and prophetic etc. Therefore one must use special interpretive techniques to decipher it.

(4) The Bible is not simply self-contradictory (even when it appears to be when things are taken literally) but forms a larger harmony and it is not merely wrong or in error (even when it seems to violate our moral or scientific belief) but teaches a higher and deeper truth. (Kugel, p. 14-15). In the Rabbinic tradition it was no problem to assume the Torah and the Rabbis could disagree because "both these and these are the words of the living God." (??). However many ancient and even contemporary readers want to harmonize all contradictions. With the help of the nonliteralist interpretive patterns of reading a cryptic text that is relatively easy, but it is quite difficult if a literalist historical reading is seen as the dominant meaning of Divine revelation.

The ancient interpreters begin for Kugel with the return of some of the Jews from the Babylonian exile in 538 BCE and the subsequent editing, public reading, and interpreting of the Torah as the guiding legal and spiritual constitution of this new polity in Jerusalem, Judea (Nehemia 8)

The period of exile had had a lasting effect on the people. To begin with, as with any such upheaval, the Babylonian episode had reshuffled the political deck. The returning exiles were not of one mind as to what should happen next: Who was to rule Judah - some member of the former royal family, or the priests who had controlled the (now-destroyed) temple, or yet some other group? And should the returnees-as the Persians expected-settle meekly into being a minor province in the Persian Empire, under the control of a distant regime? Or should they wait for the opportunity to gain a measure of political autonomy, even independence?

What is interesting is **the role that Israel's ancient texts played in the debate** over such questions. Perhaps it was the very fact of returning that brought people to evoke the past in trying to determine what to do in the future." ... Those who made the long journey back to Judah were thus a self-selected group, eager... to go back to what had been before - not just to the land itself, but to everything that living on that land had come to represent in their minds. In other words, returning to their homeland was ... an attempt to resurrect the past.

But what exactly was that past - how had things been arranged before? It was Israel's own library of ancient texts that seemed to hold the answers to such questions - records of centuries of historical events as well as the weighty pronouncements of ancient prophets and sages. So different groups, even as they argued with one another as to the proper course to follow, used these ancient writings to bolster their positions.(James Kugel, *How to Read the Bible*, p. 9)

The past was to determine what would be in the future, and saying what had been was thus potentially an act of great political significance. For this same reason, the interpreters of Scripture became increasingly important figures in Israel after the Babylonian exile. Since ancient texts were being looked to for guidance about the future, part of the interpreter's job became specifically **to trace a dotted line between past and present and say precisely what was to be concluded for us from this or that ancient text**. It was not just Israel's historical books that were so scrutinized, but the entire library. Do the words of this ancient prophet or that ancient sage have any implications for our present situation?

It is difficult to overstate the importance of this change. From now on, the books in Israel's sacred library would have a new role: these books may have been written long ago, but they were not just about things that happened in the past. Carefully analyzed, the words of these ancient texts might reveal a message about how people ought to arrange their affairs now and in the future.(p. 10)

In contrast the **modern historical critical approach** rejects all those assumptions:

Spinoza in the *Tractatus Theologo-Politicus* (1670) outlined a new proposal for how the Bible was to be read, and this program became the marching orders of biblical scholars for the next three centuries

1. **Scripture is to be understood by Scripture alone.** The time-honored traditions about what the Bible means (Spinoza had in mind rabbinic midrash as well as Christian typological and allegorical interpretations) often lead to "absurdities"; therefore only Scripture's own words are to be considered. "All knowledge of Scripture must be sought from Scripture alone."

2. In order to understand Scripture, we must understand all the peculiarities of its language and its world of ideas, and **not impose on it our own, later conceptions.** There is no reason to assume that what Scripture says conforms to our own values or our current knowledge - or even to logical thought. We should thus "take every precaution against the undue influence not only of our own prejudices, but of our faculty of reason."

3. We should thus begin by assuming that **Scripture means what Scripture says** even when it disagrees with our own conceptions we have to take such things literally unless they can be shown to contradict some other saying of Moses, in which case they may be interpreted metaphorically."

4. Someone who wishes to inquire into Scripture's meaning must likewise investigate how the books themselves were put together and the process of their transmission. The life of the reputed author must be studied, his personality traits as well as his **historical context**, in order to understand how he intended what he said to be understood whether, for example, he intended something as an actual law or merely as moral instruction, and whether something was being put forward as eternally valid or merely as a short-term measure, "things of only temporary significance or directed only to the benefit of a few." [genre]

5. Finally, in considering the words of prophets, one must recognize that they frequently contradict one another.

Spinoza calls for the **systematic dismantling of the Four Assumptions** mentioned earlier.

Scripture is cryptic and allusive? Not at all;

Scripture should always be assumed to mean (unless clearly proven otherwise) exactly and literally what it says.

Scripture has a lesson for us today? On the contrary, Scripture can be understood only in the context of its own time, and presumably some portion, perhaps most, of what it says was never intended as "eternally valid" but only applied to people living then (or even just some people living then, "a few"). Scripture is perfectly harmonious and without error? Hardly.

All Scripture is divinely given or divinely inspired? [No, prophecy and miracle cannot be relied upon]. (Kugel, p. 31-33)

Modern commentators have become much more sophisticated without abandoning Spinoza's assumptions. They no longer give priority to the literal meaning of the text unless otherwise proven. Texts often carry cryptic messages - subtexts, interests, even when also understandable literally.