

## Midrash and the Reform Jew Today

### An Introduction to Midrash

בֵּן בַּג בַּג אָמַר, הִפְּךָ בָּהּ וְהִפְּךָ בָּהּ, דְּכֻלָּא בָּהּ

Ben Bag Bag says: turn it and turn it, for everything is in it.

*-Mishnah Pirkei Avot 5:22*

The Hebrew Bible – the Torah, Prophets, and Writings – otherwise known as the TaNaKh, is the most important book in all of Judaism. It is our core. Whether you are orthodox, Conservative, or Reform, observant, spiritual, or secular, whether you believe it is the word of God, divinely inspired, or just another old book, the Tanakh, and the Torah in particular, is an essential aspect of our identities as Jews. It binds us together without making us the same. In it are our origins as a people, our shared story, our connection to a power larger than ourselves. From it we draw our traditions and customs, our values and beliefs, our sense of right and wrong. The emphasis we place on it is different for each of us, yet, whether we are aware of it or not, the Tanakh has a real effect on us and our world, even today. This, in one sense, is the meaning of Ben Bag Bag’s statement, “turn it [Torah] and turn it, for everything is in it.”

Now, most of us, especially in the Reform movement, would be quick to point out that there are numerous problems with our sacred text. Its treatment of women, constant call for animal sacrifices (and even a few child/human sacrifices), and condoned religious warfare/ethnic cleansing absolutely offend our modern sensibilities. This is yet to even mention the linguistic, literary, and redaction “problems” within, amongst, and between the books. Though they would most certainly not call these aspects “problems,” even the most religiously orthodox Jew would recognize and agree that there are numerous “challenges,” for us to deal with, in the text of the Hebrew bible. Even with these problems/challenges and despite its antiquity, if we allow it and know how to access it, this book, written thousands of years ago, still informs our lives today.

Unfortunately, this process, accessing the text of the TaNaKh in a way that still provides meaning for our lives, is difficult and has been forgotten or simply ignored by many liberal Jews. Too often, when we encounter an issue, especially one which does not align with our modern values and lives, we reject that part of the text, pointing to it as a mistake or an archaic, and thus irrelevant, piece. Even when we do attempt to make connections to our lives today, we usually remain at the surface level, pointing to a similarity in situation, and avoid digging deeper into the value/meaning of the text. Moreover, we, in the liberal movements, for one reason or another, have mostly ignored the existence of an entire compendium of rabbinic literature that attempts to address these “problems” of the text, both intratextual and its relevance to one’s (specifically the authors’) life situation: midrash. Rediscovering and reincorporating the works of Midrash, drawing it out of obscurity from our ancient traditions and into our modern Reform tradition, can affect multiple, beneficial changes within our movement, culture, and selves, as well as our understanding of and connection to Judaism.

First and most simply, the works of Midrash themselves offer numerous opinions on the entire Torah, and much of the TaNaKh, giving us already established options to help understand our scriptures. In fact, Midrash is probably the single most expansive type of rabbinic literature, and it all specifically deals with the Hebrew bible. Thus, secondly, through these texts we can understand the historical context and, to some extent, internal experience of the authors. Third, within these works of Midrash are myriads of genuine Jewish stories and myths waiting to be read and reinterpreted for a new time, and can enrich our own Jewish culture and identities. Finally, through studying and using these texts, we can learn to apply some midrashic methods of analysis ourselves and, in turn, reopen a sense of Jewish creativity. Moreover, I believe that, as we have and continue to progress through modernity, liberal Judaism is in a period of

uncertainty, similar to that which precipitated midrash in antiquity, and that a renewal of this literature may help us transition as well.

Midrash, however, is a complicated subject to understand, due to its base ideology, unfamiliar use of language, and the expansive nature of the literary form. Unlike Mishna and Talmud, which have very specific books to which they refer, one and two respectively, many different works, multiple genres, and even sections within non-midrashic works fall under the term “midrash,” which comes from the root for “to seek” or “to ask” (Strack and Stemberger 234-235). In its most basic sense, without the complexities we will discuss later, midrash is a stylized process of rabbinic interpretation of/on Biblical verse; however, it is not objective commentary meant solely to elucidate the scripture, rather midrashic interpretation often contains an ideological intention. Before we can really begin a discussion of what midrash is, we must understand the historical context which led to the development of Rabbinic Judaism and, thus, allowed the rise of midrashic thought.

Already in Deuteronomy, literarily, and certainly by the destruction and reestablishment of the Temple, historically, Jewish ritual expression had been centralized in sacrifices performed at the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Eventually this religious dependence on a specific building would lead to the question of how to continue Jewish existence if the Temple was truly gone. Nevertheless, even at the time of the reestablishment (516 BCE), the Jewish community saw a change in structure – the public reading of that Torah and its exposition (as seen in Nehemiah 8 through 10) – that began a process towards the Rabbinic period. While the exposition or interpretation done in this instance and throughout the Second Temple can hardly be described as anything more than proto-midrash (i.e. it may have shared structural/exegetical similarities, but it lacked the ideological foundation midrash), this public event, outside the political and religious

sphere of the Temple, created an opening for non-priestly, yet learned members of the community to establish themselves within Israelite society (Gafni 3-4). This role became more pronounced as the Second Temple period continued on and the Priestly Class was exposed to corruption and distrust (ibid). Eventually, in the last couple of centuries leading up to the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., these opposing groups solidified into two distinct sects, the Sadducees (Priests) and the Pharisees (non-priestly).

One of the primary distinctions between these two groups was their treatment of what the Pharisees called “the transmission of the fathers.” The Sadducees were literalists when it came to the Biblical text, after all, their primary occupation and livelihood as priests was a direct result of the instructions in the Torah. The Pharisees on the other hand, believed there were additional, unwritten, teachings that had been handed down from generation to generation, originating with God and given to Moses along with the Torah at Mount Sinai, i.e. “the transmission of the fathers.” This concept was extremely important in the development of Rabbinic Judaism and eventually became the idea of “Oral Torah.”

After the destruction in 70 C.E. of the Temple, around which the entire Jewish religious (and to some extent social) structure revolved, the Jews needed to find a new path. One that would maintain a sense of continuity with tradition while allowing an opening for creativity and adaptation. “The transmission of the fathers” filled this need perfectly (Aaron 403). The belief that an unwritten set of traditions constituting an “Oral Torah” was given to Moses on Mount Sinai, in addition to the written Torah, provided the ambiguity and flexibility necessary for creating a new form of Judaism, while the chain of transmission, as elucidated in Pirkei Avot Chapter 1, maintained a true sense of connection to their origins (ibid). Based on this concept of

Oral Torah and a shift to a more localized religion, e.g. synagogues and schools, the Rabbinic period was born.

Like the rest of Rabbinic Judaism, the literary form of midrash found a basis in Oral Torah. The concept that there was more revealed at Mount Sinai than the literal words of Torah allowed the rabbis to offer interpretations that may not seem like logical extensions. However, midrash actually takes this idea and extends it further. For the purposes of midrashic literature, the written Torah itself contains and allows for the same ambiguity and flexibility as Oral Torah. In other words, the words of the written Torah (including the Prophets and the Writings) hold hidden meanings that the hermeneutic principles of midrash illuminate; therefore, in some sense, the written Torah, the words and letters themselves, lead to the Oral Torah. Moreover, in the view of the midrashic thinkers, these words and, thus, hidden meanings encompass the entire world, everything one might need to know to live a good, spiritual, Jewish life. This, the ideology of midrash, is another sense of Ben Bag Bag's statement, "turn it and turn it, for everything is in it," truly everything.

Ultimately, as David H. Aaron explains, this concept and process, "midrash, as a literary genre, arose out of a quite distinctive Rabbinic attitude regarding how language works," especially the language of the written Torah (400). Up to this point, everything has been relatively straight forward. The midrashic use of language, however, is convoluted, even though its own internal logic is completely sound. Midrash uses language in unfamiliar ways. It breaks with the internal logic of normal discourse and literary structure, making improbable (perhaps radical) connections and assigning significance to typically meaningless aspects. This altered sense of language with regard to the written Torah evolved out of its status as a divine document. The Torah is not a transcript of God's speech to Moses on Mount Sinai, rather it is the physical

emanation of God's words (Aaron 406). In this light, the well-known phrase from our Torah Service, *al pi Adonai, b'yad Moshe* (by the word of God, in the hand of Moses), is simply incorrect. Rather, the Torah is the word of God written with the finger of God; therefore, the physical words take on additional significance.

This significance actually gives rise to the Oral Torah. Unlike normal writing, the “surface meaning” – the meaning we see through normal linguistic processes – is not the only true meaning of the Torah (Aaron 406). In fact, according to midrashic thought, each aspect of the divine text lends itself to endless interpretations that were all intended by God upon the composition of the text, we simply have yet to discover those meanings, i.e. polysemy, the belief that a single syntactical unit contains multiple semantic meanings (Hirshman 118). As David H. Aaron explains, through this “metasemantic” concept, “the sages sacrifice the determinacy of ordinary speech for the generative indeterminacy of a divine writing that requires ongoing interpretation,” which “constituted an ongoing form of ‘revelation’” (Aaron 405-6). This results from a similar, and familiar, concept, that God is capable of imbuing meaning through inhuman speech actions. *Shamor v'zachor b'dibur echad* – God is capable in one utterance of multiple intentions.

(While Oral Torah, which is still considered the word of God, eventually gets written down too, the writing itself, which is done by human action, does not possess the same divine characteristic as the written Torah, divine action. Therefore, works such as the Mishnah, Talmud, and Midrash itself are not open to the ideologically based expository process of midrash. In other words, you do not write “midrash” on anything other than the holy scriptures. (Aaron 406).)

The concept of divine writing and the unique significance of the language of the Torah is actually taken to mythic levels by the midrash (Aaron 409). The first midrash that I ever read in Hebrew, Genesis Rabbah 1:1, expounds:

The great Rabbi Hoshaya opened, “*I [Wisdom, interpreted as Torah] was with Him as a confidant (חֶסֶד), a source of delight every day*” (Proverbs 8:30) ... חֶסֶד means "pedagogue/nanny," as in the verse “*Just as a nanny (חֶסֶד) carries an infant*” (Numbers 11:12). ... Another interpretation, חֶסֶד means "artisan/architect" (אֲדָרָה). The Torah is saying, “I was the artisan's tool of the Holy One, blessed be He.” In comparison to this world, a king of flesh and blood who builds a castle does not build it from his own knowledge, rather from the knowledge of an architect (אֲדָרָה), and the architect does not build it from his own knowledge, rather he has scrolls and books to know how to make rooms and doorways. So too Hashem gazed in the Torah and created the world. Thus, the Torah says, “*In the beginning (בְּרֵאשִׁית) God created*” (Genesis 1:1), and בְּרֵאשִׁית means nothing other than Torah, as in the verse “*God created me [Torah] as the beginning (בְּרֵאשִׁית) of His way*” (Proverbs 8:22).

*(Translation adapted from Sefaria, verses adapted from JPS Tanakh 1985)*

This passage is an excellent example of midrash, to which we will refer back as we continue our introduction. For our current purpose, we are focusing on the passages view of the written Torah. According to this midrash, the physical Torah actually predates the creation of the world. Moreover, the words and language of the Torah were the tools through which God created everything (another meaning of Ben Bag Bag’s statement). This notion conveys the extreme significance which extends throughout the entire Tanakh, both in the largest sense and in the smallest details.

With regards to the smallest details, the Rabbis suggest that the graphemes, the letters themselves, contain meaning (Aaron 406-7). One common exegetical process which uses the individual letters is the concept of *gematria*, utilizing the numerical value of the letters within a word to expound additional meanings. Moreover, according to the Rabbis, even the shapes of the letters are an alley to revelation. For example, the Babylonian Talmud (in which there are

multiple midrashic units even though it primarily is not a work of midrash) Tractate Shabbat 104a expounds that “‘open mem, ׀, and the closed [final] mem, ׀, signify that one utterance [in Torah] may be open [for everyone to elucidate] and another may be closed [...available only to an elite]” (Aaron 407). This meaning from minutia further extends to parts of speech with minimal semantic significance as exemplified in the following midrash from Genesis Rabbah 1:14:

R. Ishmael asked R. Aqiba, saying to him, “Since you served Nahum Ish Gamzu twenty-two years [who taught that] the occurrences of the word *akh* and *raq* indicated exclusions while *et* and *gam* indicated inclusions, what is the meaning of *et* [in the first sentence of the Torah]?” [R. Ishmael] continued: “Had it been said, *In the beginning created God heaven and earth* [without the definite article and the *et* as determining the direct object], we should have said that Heaven and Earth are gods...” [R. Aqiba] replied to him: “*For [in the written Torah] there is not a meaningless thing for you* (Deut 32:47), and if it is meaningless, [it is because of ] you, for you do not know how to expound. Rather, the phrase *et hashamayim* [the heaven] is for the inclusion of the sun and moon, stars and planets, and *et haaretz* [the earth] is for the inclusion of the trees and grasses and the Garden of Eden.”

(Aaron 408)

From the two letter word *et*, תא, Aqiba has added the sun, moon, stars, planets, trees, grasses, and the entire Garden of Eden to the first day of creation, even though there is no evidence of this in the text itself. Unlike Ishmael’s point, which a grammatical issue, only by accepting the Rabbinic concept of divine writing and Oral Torah can Aqiba’s exposition be made and understood (Aaron 409).

On the opposite end of the spectrum, the letters, words, and verses of the Torah also have a quality of lexical omni-significance (Aaron 402). Strack and Stemberger explain that, in midrash, “one encounters the Bible as an integral whole, which accordingly carries a uniform divine message” (237). In other words, regardless of different contexts, stories and even books, every part of the Tanakh is connected and has the potential to inform and elucidate any other



section (Aaron 402). In this light, the authors of midrash were acutely aware of their task, “explaining the Bible from the Bible. The context [of which], however, is the entire Bible” (Strack and Stemberger 237). Thus, “a great deal of midrash is devoted to a persistent interlacing of various parts of scripture, relating them intertextually one to the other” (Hirshman 128). Returning to Genesis Rabbah 1:1, we can see the principle of lexical omni-significance at work. The author uses two verse from Proverbs (the 28<sup>th</sup> book of the Tanakh), 8:30, 22, to explain its primary focus in Genesis 1:1 (the very first verse). Moreover, this midrash uses a verses from Numbers, 11:12, as well as (had we read the entire passage) Lamentations 4:5, Ester 2:7, and Nahum 3:8, encompassing all three sections of the Tanakh, to develop their argument. As a result, we clearly see that the entire Tanakh, regardless of its historical placement and authorship, is used collectively and equally in the process of midrash.

Additionally, this approach to the language of the Torah, specifically the concepts of omni-significance and metasemantics, permit the authors of midrash to “play” with the unpointed text (Hirshman 127). Again, referring back to Genesis Rabbah 1:1, we see a typical word play of the midrash. In this passage, the authors are focusing on the Hebrew word אָמוֹן, *amon*, in the opening verse from Proverbs 8:30. They connect to this word through a lexical similarity the word אָמֵן, *omein*, meaning “nanny,” which shares the letters aleph, mem, and nun, and, from this, they ascribe this meaning, “nanny,” to the original אָמוֹן, *amon*. This process is repeated a second time with the word אָוֶן, *ooman*, meaning “artisan/architect,” which again shares the same three letters, and results in the main point of the passage, that the Torah was the architect with which God worked creation. (The rabbis had no knowledge of the root system within Hebrew, so this process allowed connections that had nothing to do with the actual meanings of the words (Lecture Aaron 1/19).) Taken a step further, this process allowed the

rabbis immense creativity, e.g. the first word of the Torah בְּרֵאשִׁית, *bereishit*, which (though admittedly grammatically challenging) is usually translated as “in the beginning,” was broken into two words בְּרֵאֵשֶׁת, *bara shit*, meaning “He made six” (Hirshman 127).

This may seem like an abuse, or some might even call it a bastardization of the biblical text because the Rabbis are “abandoning completely the syntactical logic of the sentence or even the basic meaning of the words” (Hirshman 127). In some sense this is true. Even the rabbis occasionally recognize this fault: in Sifra, *Tazria Negaim 13.2 (W. 68b)*, they criticizing a fellow sage, “behold, you say to Scripture: be still while I interpret you” (Strack and Stemberger 239). Nevertheless, this manipulation of the text is a primary process on which midrash relies. This word play is made acceptable by the rabbinic assumption that “if they [the author] could find a basis for relating the two words, then God must have intended that they be elucidated” and results from the perceived characteristics of divine writing, as described above (Aaron 402-3). Ultimately, the *darshan*, the rabbi/author, is encouraged to use the text of the written Torah to express their desired meaning and achieve their intended purpose.

However, the purpose of any specific midrash can be extremely varied. We have already seen an example of the variation within midrash. R. Ishmael and R. Aqiba in Genesis Rabbah 1:14 represent two perspectives: one, Ishmael, is focused on expounding and solving a grammatical issue remaining close to the surface meaning, while the other, Aqiba, offers “an altogether unintuitive interpretation” which adds substance to the minimal text of the Torah (Aaron 408-9). Thus, we see two different approaches, yet both of these interpretations attempt to clarify an aspect of the text. This is one of the primary uses and purposes of many midrashim. In these cases, the focus of the midrash really is the text, even if the exegesis is still significantly more complex than the surface meaning would seem to suggest. In this light, one of my rabbis

Sandford Kopnick explained midrash as “the sages filling in the white space of the Torah,” which can be anything from identifying an ambiguous individual to the creation of an entirely “new” (or perhaps in the mindset of the sages “rediscovered”) story. An alternative and just as common use and purpose of midrashim is “to make a biblical passage relevant to contemporary concerns” (Aaron 402). In this case, I would add to Rabbi Kopnick’s explanation, “the sages are filling in the white space of the Torah” with their problems, hoping that the divine word may shed some new light on their real world problems. These problem include threats to the rabbinic understanding of the Hebrew bible and Jewish beliefs both from external sources, Pagans and later Christianity, as well as internal sources, Jewish Gnostics and early “Christians,” and covered a wide range of topics, from assimilation and intermarriage to religious discrimination (Hirshman 129). Genesis Rabbah 1:1 is actually an example of this. In this midrash, the supremacy of the Torah itself is expounded which lends support to the Jewish perspective of its own holy text and opposes the Torah’s dismissal by pagans and Christians.

Strack and Stemberger point out that Le Déaut stresses “midrash cannot be precisely defined, but only described” (Strack and Stemberger 235). This is what I have attempted to do so far, explain the basis on which midrash relies and the processes through which midrash works. I must reemphasize that all midrash is based around the written Torah (Prophets and Writings included), expounding the Oral Torah in a manner which is permitted through the rabbinic perspective on the language of divine writing. Over the course of time, this literary form developed sub-genres, such as the *Petichta* or proem form of which Genesis Rabbah 1:1 is an example, each with more stylized structures and their own genre markers. Moreover, as time passed, individual midrashim were collected into compilations which were redacted and formalized into the works of Midrash with which we are familiar today.

Rabbis and scholars have attempted to organize the expansive corpus of midrashim by dividing them into categories, usually based either on their content or their structure. While these distinctions are largely artificial and are not wholly precise, the traditional divisions of the Midrashim are important to understand as they help to illuminate more aspects of the literary form (Strack and Stemberger 239; Lecture Aaron 1/12). The two most prominent and traditional divisions are Halakhic vs. Haggadic (Aggadic) midrashim and Exegetical vs. Homiletical midrashim.

The traditional division of Rabbinic thought, halakhah vs. haggadah (aggadah), applies equally to Midrash. A passage of midrash whose purpose is identified as to clarify, define, or reconcile an issue dealing primarily with Jewish law is described as a halakhic midrash, while any other midrash which deals more with the biblical narrative or external controversy, essentially anything that is not deemed to be halakhic, is categorized as haggadah. This can be relatively simple when applied to individual passages; however, when analyzing compilations, the distinction is much less accurate. The Halakhic works of Midrashim are perceived to contain mostly legal material whose purpose is to “establish Scripture as the source of [Jewish law]” (Strack and Stemberger 247). These works include Mekhilta (de Rabbi Ishmael and de Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai), Sifra, and the three Sifre collections (ibid 247-275). Even so, any Halakhic Midrash is bound to have some haggadah woven in, just as the traditionally Haggadic Midrashim will contain some halakhah (ibid 239). In addition to this distinction, the term Halakhic Midrashim has evolved to also contain an inference of time period; thus, these collections are considered to be earlier midrashim, Tanaitic in origin (ibid 239-40). However, the dates of most midrashim are too problematic to determine with much certainty, which negates this development (ibid).

While Halakhah vs. Haggadah is concerned with the content/purpose of an individual passage or a full compilation of Midrash, Exegetical vs. Homiletical is focused primarily on the structure of the collection. Exegetical works of midrash are compiled and organized according to the order of the Biblical text, verse by verse even to the point of progressing word by word (Strack and Stemberger 240). This category receives its name because, traditionally, the focus of these works are perceived to be the exposition or exegesis of the text itself. Homiletical Midrashim, on the other hand, are not so specifically organized, due to the nature of the passages included, which may provide “a devotional commentary on individual verses or [more broadly] on the main theme of the weekly reading from the Torah or the Prophets” (ibid). The name of this category relates back to one perception of these midrashim, that these were the transcripts of Rabbinic sermons, or homilies, given on different subjects and Torah portions. However, Strack and Stemberger explain that “the homiletic midrashim probably do not on the whole contain actual synagogue sermons but literary abridgements which in part were developed directly in the schools” as intellectual exercises (240). Like the Halakhic vs. Haggadic categories, there is also a certain amount of crossover between the Exegetical and Homiletical forms and structures (ibid). Nevertheless, the traditional exegetical midrashim are primarily Genesis Rabbah and Lamentations Rabbah, while the other Rabbahs, Pesiqta de Rav Kahana, Pesiqta Rabbati and Tanhuma-Yelamdenu are considered homiletical midrashim (ibid 276-313).

There is so much more to discuss regarding midrash and much of it must be experienced in order to truly feel its significance. This is especially true regarding the different genres of midrashim. Each one contains completely different styles, linguistic forms and structures, as well as varied approaches to the text of the Torah. However, our discussion today regarding the rabbinic view of divine writing, its metasemantics and omni-significance, and the Oral Torah is

essential to and will help us understand all genres of Midrash. Furthermore, through our study and rediscovery of this literary form called midrash, we have the potential to renew our religion and culture by enriching our understanding of the central text of Judaism, the Tanakh, and exploring our own Jewish identities, both in connection to our ancestral tradition/heritage and within our modern society. Finally, we can reawaken a lost Jewish creativity, learning from each Midrash we study, the rabbinic process of exposition and revelation. In order to accomplish this task, we must believe that the Torah is still relevant to our lives today and remain true to Ben Bag Bag's statement, "Turn it and turn it, for everything is in it."

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