

Parallels between events, persons, or institutions also highlight many types of continuities and correlations within Scripture.

One cannot speak of any consistent literary feature or style among the *haftarot*. Each individual reading sculpts its discourse out of a larger context and establishes its own rhetorical emphasis and features. In several cases, the *haftarot* overlap separate units of scripture, thus underscoring the fact that the prophetic readings are a rabbinical creation and institution. The diverse forms are discussed in the commentary to the *haftarot* in this volume. Also because of the great variety of texts and topics, there is no consistent theme or emphasis among the *haftarot*. Nevertheless, religious instruction and national hope are frequent

features. The individual types are also considered in the commentary.

For the synagogue, the *haftarah* marks the "leaving off" (*afarta*) or "completion" (*ashlamata*) of the official Torah service and is formally set off from it in several ways. The *haftarah* service, so to speak, begins after the reading from the Torah portion has been completed and a half *Kaddish* has been recited to mark a break between it and what follows. Then a brief passage (of at least three verses) at the end of the Torah portion is repeated. After the Torah scroll is rolled up and set aside, the *haftarah* is chanted. Blessings before and after the recitation of the *haftarah* enhance the authority of the lesson from the Prophets and present it within a sacred liturgical framework.

## MIDRASH

David Wolpe

The Bible is at once powerful and cryptic. Characters are often sketched rather than elaborately described, and key concepts are not always spelled out. The Bible instructs us not to perform "*m'lakhah*" on *Shabbat*, but the word *m'lakhah* is never defined! The rabbinical tradition comes along to fill gaps, analyze implications, color in characters, spin tales, and derive laws—to take the biblical text as a starting point for building the structure of Jewish life.

The medium through which the Sages work is *midrash*. The word *midrash* comes from the root *דרש*—to search out. Use of this word can be confusing, because it refers both to a method and a body of work. There are books of collected *midrash* (plural: *midrashim*), the most well-known being *Midrash Rabbah* (literally: Great Midrash, Large Midrash). The body of *midrash* in the Talmud is referred to as *aggadah*. Yet one can also speak of "doing" *midrash*, of seeking out and explicating texts. *Midrash* is a type of investigation of a text, or a genre, not just a body of literature; and it is found in different measures in all the classical rabbinical literature.

Most classical *midrash* originated in ancient Palestine, among rabbis who lived from the end of the Roman Era (ca. 3rd century C.E.) to the beginning of the Islamic Era (the 8th or 9th century C.E.). Some *midrashim* were written and polished later than the 7th century, and the origins of *midrash* go back much further, not only to earlier sages (of the Tannaitic period, the first few centuries of the Common Era) but also back, in fact, to the Bible itself.

In Exod. 12:8, we are told that the paschal sacrifice must be eaten "roasted over the fire." Deut. 16:7 states: "You shall cook and eat it." The words for "cook" and "roast" denote different processes. In 2 Chron. 35:13, there is a reconciliation: "They roasted the passover sacrifice in fire, as prescribed, while the sacred offerings they cooked in pots." This simple illustration of the midrashic process at work in the Bible shows how problems of interpretation arise and are resolved from the very beginning of a system of law and lore.

In Jer. 25:11–12, 29:10, a prophecy reads: "And those nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. When the seventy years are over, I will punish the king of Babylon and

that nation. . . . For thus said the LORD: When Babylon's seventy years are over, I will take note of you, and I will fulfill to you My promise of favor—to bring you back to this place." God apparently made a clear promise to the people through Jeremiah: In 70 years, they would be redeemed. But a few hundred years later, in the time of Daniel, it appeared to Daniel and his contemporaries that the prophecy had not been realized. They were still not free. So Daniel re-envisioned the prophecy: "Seventy weeks [of years, i.e., 70 × 7] have been decreed for your people and your holy city until the measure of transgression is filled and that of sin complete" (Dan. 9:24). Daniel has recast Jeremiah's prophecy to mean 490 years.

Both of these examples, although they come from the Bible itself, illustrate important principles about the Midrash as it flourished among the Sages. First, there is the fundamental underlying assumption that the Torah is entirely the word of God. Therefore, all of it is true and all of it is relevant. If something in the Torah seems to contradict experience, either the experience has been wrongly interpreted or the Torah has not been properly understood. Thus the text of Daniel has no qualms about understanding the Torah differently from what we might see as the "plain" sense of the text. For the Torah cannot get it wrong. It must be correct, and it must be all-inclusive. As Mishnah *Avot* (5:22) puts it: "Turn it [the Torah] over and over, for everything is in it."

Scholars divide *midrashim* differently. The oldest categorization is between legal and homiletical *midrashim*; from the Bible onward, there were *midrashim* whose aim was primarily legal (as in which way the paschal lamb should be cooked) and others that were primarily homiletical (sermonic, as in when redemption would arrive). The legal *midrashim* have been called *midrash halakhah* and the homiletic, *midrash aggadah*.

The legal *midrashim* deal with the whole range of Jewish law, which is as wide as human experience. Everything from dietary laws to sexual practices to civil codes rests on a net-

work of interpretation that views the entire Torah as one seamless, interconnected web of the divine word. The homiletic *midrashim* gave the rabbinical imagination free rein: stories, counsel, pithy wisdom, and far-fetched fables all found their way into the *aggadah*.

The third lesson to be derived from these examples is that the Torah is not only all-inclusive but also does not wane or change with time. Because God has authored the text, the entire text is sacred and timelessly relevant. The midrashic sense of time is not entirely linear. In God's word, the past and future live in constant interaction. There is no anachronism, no sense that things are out of time sequence and therefore impossible.

Thus in elaborating the story of the Binding of Isaac (Gen. 22:1–19), medieval *midrash* has Abraham quoting a psalm that would not be written for some 1,000 years: "Abraham's eyes were fixed on Isaac's, while Isaac's eyes were fixed on the heavens. Tears flowed from Abraham as he cried out 'My son, may your Creator provide another sacrifice in your stead.' A piercing cry of agony rose from his lips; his eyes, pained and trembling, looked at the divine Presence as he raised his voice and said: 'I will lift my eyes to the mountains; from where shall my help come?'" (Ps. 121:1; *Yalkut Sh.* 101). Similarly, for Daniel the prophecy of Jeremiah is not time bound; it must be relevant to Daniel's own situation, for the word of God does not lapse or expire.

Law and lore are not the only way to divide up the Midrash. Other possible divisions exist, including distinguishing between literary forms, such as sermonic and expository. A famous collection of sermonic *midrashim* is *P'sikta d'Rav Kahana*. Sermonic *midrashim* draw a moral point, usually by ranging far over scripture and tradition. They generally use a verse as a jumping-off point to display textual and rhetorical virtuosity. For instance, the phrase "on the day that Moses finished setting up the tabernacle" (Num. 7:1) provides *P'sikta d'Rav Kahana* with an opportunity to begin a beautiful homily. The problem: Moses was not the architect—Bezalel ben Uri was

responsible for construction; so why does the Torah credit Moses? The Midrash explains how in each generation evil people push the divine Presence away from the world, while *tzaddikim*, the righteous, bring it closer. Because God's Presence dwelt in the tabernacle, it was Moses' merit to have drawn that Presence down to earth. In the process of this explanation, the Midrash quotes numerous sources, makes wide connections over different parts of Scripture, and winds up by returning to the opening verse (the *pihta*) with which it began. By the end we have been taken on a theological tour of history, including times when God's presence seemed far away, and we are taught how the tabernacle and the merit of the righteous combined to bring God close.

Other *midrashim* form a sort of running expository commentary on the Bible. They are explanatory, not sermonic, and follow the Bible verse by verse. A famous example cites the *Akedah*, the Binding of Isaac mentioned above. The Midrash follows the drama from the outset. Here is an example of continuous commentary:

**Ber. R. 55:7.** *Take your son, your favored one* (lit.: your only one), *whom you love, Isaac* (Gen. 22:1). [The Midrash now envisages a dialogue between God and Abraham which accounts for the apparent redundancy of that sentence.] "Take your son," God said. "Which one?" asked Abraham. "Your only son," replied God. "But each is an only son to his mother," answered Abraham. "Whom you love," said God. "But I love both," answered Abraham. Finally, God said, "Isaac."

**55:8.** Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai said: "Both love and hate disturb the usual patterns of life. Thus it says: *So early next morning, Abraham saddled his ass* (Gen. 22:2). Surely he had many slaves [who could have done it for him]! But love changes the usual pattern. Conversely, it says: *When he arose in the morning, Balaam saddled his ass* (Num. 22:21). Surely he, too, had many slaves! But he did it himself because hate changes the usual pattern."

We see here that the Midrash explores Abraham's psychology through continuous comment. In the first place, it shows that Abraham, who in the biblical text seemingly raises no protest, tried to confuse the issue until God made clear He was asking for the sacrifice of Isaac. At the same time the Midrash exploits a redundancy in the text. In the second case, Abraham's saddling his own donkey is tied to a later instance when the pagan magician Balaam saddles his own donkey to curse Israel. The Midrash makes the acute psychological point that passion leads one to perform an action oneself; we do not trust others to take care of our beloved or to dispatch our enemies. At the same time, it reveals that Abraham's state of mind was ardent, not indifferent, as one could assume without the aid of the Sages' reading.

For the Sages, the biblical text is a springboard. But not all *midrashim*—even the non-legal *midrashim*—are concerned with interpreting the Bible. The Sages also tell tales of postbiblical personalities and events. There are tales of rabbinical figures, of kings, of pagans, and of princes. Still, the bulk of *aggadah* fills in the tales of characters or events in the Bible. Midrash advances our understanding of the biblical characters and fills in gaps in the text. What happened during the three days that Abraham and Isaac traveled to Mount Moriah for the *Akedah*? What exchanges took place between Moses and God at the end of the Torah as this greatest of prophets stood alone on the mountain preparing to die? The Sages, with their human insight and exhaustive familiarity with the biblical text and tradition, are ready with a story, a poignant observation, or a subtle interpretation that helps the text live anew.

No character is more often illumined than the character of God. The text that tells of God's destruction of the tower of Babel reads: "The LORD came down to look at the city and the tower" (Gen. 11:5). Surely God does not need to move down? The Sages could have engaged in abstract discussion about whether the text really intends to suggest that God moved.

That would be the tack of the philosopher. Instead, they drew a lesson: Although God sees all, “came down” is written to teach us that one should not pronounce judgment on that which one has not personally examined (Tanh. B. Noah 28).

Many of the *midrashim* about God compare Him to a king and contrast God’s behavior with that of an earthly monarch. A *midrash* on Psalms (149:1) is typical: “While an earthly king has all sorts of attendants and lieutenants and viceroys who share in his tasks and his glory, it is not so with the King of kings: God bears the burdens alone, and God alone deserves our praise.”

*Midrash* is both serious and playful. Although some of the fables stem from a religious inclination, many represent an artistic vehicle. Often the narratives of *midrash aggadah* appeal to our human imperative to tell and hear stories. As stated in the Midrash: “In olden days when people had means, they would want to hear words of Mishnah and Talmud. Now when people are impoverished, and suffering from the pangs of exile, they want to hear Bible—and the tales of *aggadah*” (PdRK 101).

Finally, the text itself impels *midrash*. The Bible demands *midrash* when there is some problem, inconsistency, or oddity. If a word is spelled peculiarly, if an unusual word is used, or if the sequence of words or verses is strange, the Midrash leaps in to illuminate, explain, or speculate. At the end of the story of Joseph, his father, Jacob, has died. Joseph is viceroy of Egypt. Joseph’s brothers, afraid that he will now seek to exact punishment for their early treatment of him, send a message to Joseph. The brothers contend that their father, Jacob, before he died, left a message asking Joseph to please forgive his brothers (Gen. 50:17). The Sages, noting that the message contains the word “please” three times, state: “One who has wronged another is obligated to seek forgiveness at least three separate times” (BT Yoma 87a). From here later authorities derived the practice of asking for forgiveness three times before *Yom Kippur* if we have wronged another

(see S.A. O.H. 606). Not only have the Sages called attention to the language of Joseph’s brothers, thereby giving us an insight into their state of mind, but they have drawn from the verse an important moral lesson.

In exploring the biblical account of Creation, the Sages exhibit a natural interest in the nature of humanity. That, allied to the deep interest in words we mentioned above, leads to the following *midrash*: “The LORD God formed [וייצר; *va-yyitzer*] man” (Gen. 2:7). “Why does וייצר have the letter *yod* twice [which is not necessary for proper spelling]? To show that God created the human being with both a good inclination and an evil inclination” (BT Ber. 61a). This *midrash* shows the Sages using the text as an opportunity. Surely the rabbinical notion that human beings have two opposing natures battling in our breasts did not arise because of the spelling of the word *va-yyitzer*! From experience and learning, the Sages concluded this about humanity; the next step was to find a biblical basis for this observed truth.

That is why even frivolous *midrash* is serious. *Midrash* is the tool by which our ancestors unpacked the meaning of a text or even read their own meaning into the text. *Midrash* is associative; a word that appears in two entirely different contexts can be used to link them together. Because everything is written by God, there can be no accidental juxtapositions.

By now we can understand why Hebrew is so vital to the midrashic enterprise. Texts written in Hebrew, the holy tongue (*l’shon ha-kodesh*), are in the original language. Many *midrashim* are based on puns and other Hebrew allusions and cannot truly be appreciated without recourse to Hebrew. Because there is nothing superfluous in the biblical text and Hebrew is the sacred language, the “trigger” for a *midrash* need not be a whole story. The trigger can be a verse, a word, or even a single letter—as we saw above in the case of *va-yyitzer*.

The Bible is not a text that can be emended. No verse can be added or cut out. The only

way to get the Bible to yield different meanings that can accommodate new situations is to interpret.

Although classical *midrash* is time bound, the midrashic enterprise continues. In our own day, scholars, preachers, and interested readers develop their own interpretations and tales about the Bible. In each generation, dif-

ferent concerns and disciplines lead readers to new insights. From the beginning of Jewish tradition, pious Jews not only have received the text but also have helped shape it through their clarifications, expositions, additions, and interpretations—in short, through *midrash*. By *midrash* we make the text more vivid, and we make it our own.

## TRADITIONAL METHODS OF BIBLE STUDY

*Benjamin Edidin Scolnic*

What we think the Torah is helps determine the way in which we read it. Traditional Jewish commentators believe that the words of the Torah were revealed by God to Moses. Therefore, when there seem to be contradictions or errors, the commentators set about to harmonize apparent inconsistencies into one true and consistent Torah text. They also try to explain any discrepancies between biblical concepts and the ideas and beliefs of their own time. Interpretation is thus a necessity for every generation.

Modern critical scholarship reads the Bible as a document of religious faith expressed within a specific culture, tied to a specific time, limited by the meaning of the authors. Every text of the Bible, in this view, is time bound. Traditional commentators in every age seek the timeless, eternal voice of God in the words of the Torah; their reading of the Bible is informed by a deep theological commitment to an eternal God whose very word is understood as being imbedded in the text.

Over the centuries, traditional commentators have used several different approaches to discover the layers of meaning in the Torah. A convenient way to think about these approaches or levels is through a Hebrew acronym that was created for this purpose: "PaRDeS." To illustrate what PaRDeS means, let us briefly examine two verses that tell of the journey of Abraham (then known as Abram) from Egypt to Canaan:

And he proceeded by stages from the Negeb as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had

been formerly, between Bethel and Ai, the site of the altar that he had built there at first; and there Abram invoked the LORD by name (Gen. 13:3-4).

The commentators interpret the text using the following approaches:

- *P'shat*: the plain, literal sense of the verse in its context. Abraham returns to Canaan from Egypt "by stages"; he moves from one oasis to another.
- *Remez* (hint, symbol): the allegorical meaning of the verse. Each character or place in the text has a symbolic meaning. The word "Abram" is understood to be the soul; his travels trace its spiritual journey.
- *D'rash*: the homiletical meaning of the verse as viewed outside of its original context. Specific ideas and values are derived from the text, whether the text, in its literal meaning, could mean this or not. This approach reveals Abram's true intention: to visit many places where he could teach the word of God.
- *Sod*: the secret, mystical interpretation of the verse. This approach teaches that the land of Israel draws Abram from a purely nonphysical state of being to one of concrete physical reality.

PaRDeS has become a well-recognized framework for understanding traditional methods of Torah study. No single method of interpretation is considered to be the best, because the Torah is layered with meaning, is multifac-