Rethinking Theory

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MIDRASH AND THEORY

Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies

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Introduction

The Midrash-Theory Connection

This is a book about reading midrash, the literature of classical Jewish Scriptural interpretation, and about the challenges that this act of reading involves. As such, this book is about an experience as much as a subject, and about how that experience has changed in the recent past.

The major impetus for this change has come from the encounter of midrash scholarship with contemporary literary studies—structuralism, semiotics, deconstruction, cultural studies, indeed virtually all the modes of postmodernism as they have come into fashion and gone out of it. Under the impact of theory, midrash has gone through a veritable sea change. The focus of the field, its methods, its conceptual premises, have all experienced a fundamental, radical transformation. And during the same period, midrash has gained a currency within the larger intellectual world that it never possessed before, particularly within literary circles. For a short time, midrash has even been a "hot" topic.

How lasting and deep the impact of midrash has been on literary theory remains an open question. At the least, midrash has provided a vantage point on literary interpretation from which its modern phase can be seen to be but the very tip of the iceberg. If only in this way, the inclusion of midrash has enlarged the canon of theoretical criticism, and its enlargement may be still greater yet. By including midrash within its compass, criticism would exercise its power to revalue an alienated practice," as Geoffrey Hartman, the most impassioned advocate for midrash in wider literary circles, has argued. Criticism would thus "restitute" itself and, by increasing our awareness of the possibilities of creative exegesis, immeasurably enrich our textual imaginations.

My purpose here, however, is to ask not what midrash can do for literary criticism but what theory has done to midrash. For one thing, it has raised a series of questions that, while not entirely new or unanticipated, have now become explicit topics of debate. Foremost among these is the question of the contemporary significance of midrash—its cultural relevance, as it were—and the connection between that cultural relevance and what scholars like to call the meaning of midrash "in its own terms," that is, within its original historical and literary context. Where do these two meet? How does one cast the meaning of midrash in the contemporary terms of, say, literary theory without distorting its integrity? Or,
what is really at issue, without distorting it too much? To what extent is a historicist approach to midrash, as a subject of primarily antiquarian interest, truly opposed to a more literary, humanistic, and theoretical appreciation of its significance? Or, to put the same question differently, how are we to secularize our understanding of this inherently religious literature, as we must, without profaning it?

These questions are neither unique nor specific to midrash. They concern the entire project of retrieving Jewish tradition in our times. For a number of reasons—a surge of interest in midrash as a mode of popular spirituality within the wider Jewish community, the discovery of midrash as a literary tradition by contemporary Jewish writers—these questions have now emerged most urgently in relation to the way midrash has come to be studied in the last decade or two. This book is essentially a response to such questions. What it offers, though, is not so much a definitive answer or resolution as a stance—an attempt to forge what is, I hope, an approach that is both responsible and responsive, true to the literary integrity of classical Jewish literature and yet open to our desire for this literature to mean something to us. Precisely in order to make midrash speak to us in contemporary language, I have sought in this book to develop a way of talking about midrash that uses theory as a bridge, as a means of spanning the distance between the classical sources and ourselves.

This book was conceived during the same period as the midrash-theory connection developed, and the story of that connection is, in large part, the history behind its writing. The first thing to say about this story is that it was a particularly American tale, and American in a number of ways. Not only were most of the figures involved in it Americans, and not only did much of it transpire in America (the major exception being a yearlong seminar held at Hebrew University in Jerusalem in 1983–84, which culminated in the widely read collection of essays *Midrash and Literature*), but even the very linkage between midrash and theory was shaped by the environment of the American university in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In fact, it is virtually impossible to imagine the midrash-theory connection having been created at any other time and outside that specific institutional context, that is, precisely when a tidal wave of change first swept over the university’s until-then impregnable walls. This wave of change included the breakdown of the strict boundaries that previously had separated distinct academic disciplines and departments, the shifting of attention away from the centers of “high” culture—male, white, classical, Christian—toward the various “others”—feminist, ethnic, “low,” popular—that formerly inhabited only the peripheries and margins of academic study; and, perhaps most prominently, the emergence of critical theory, in its manifold versions, as a kind of new academic lingua franca, a specialized, sometimes quasi-esoteric discourse of self-reflection and self-examination concerned with its own workings and with the situation of criticism itself.

Under the new dominion of theory, many separate fields—anthropology, literature, linguistics, music, the history of science—previously unrelated and hardly known to each other suddenly found themselves thrown together and engaged in genuine dialogue, often in the service of creating a kind of new critical metadiscourse. And among all of these shifting realignments, none, perhaps, was more surprising than the midrash-theory linkage.

The initial impetus for this linkage came primarily from literary theory. For some time, in fact, literary studies in America had been in the process of what one critic has called its “dehellenization,” repudiating both the formalism of the New Critics and the genteel (and Gentile) civility of much previous academic literary study. As many of its old verities came under attack, the literary profession reopened the question perhaps most basic to its discipline. What is literature? This question could take several forms. Wherein lies the uniqueness of the work of literary art? How can one define literature as opposed to other types of discourse? What is the difference between literature and commentary or criticism? But whatever form it took, the effect of the question was to shatter the overly narrow definition of literature that previously had governed literary study in the academy. Further, by breaking the stranglehold of “literature” as a narrow category that included only a few select, special, canonical texts, literary study itself could now be extended to all sorts of writing that heretofore had not fallen under the conventional rubric. Foremost among these were literary theory and criticism themselves, which could now escape their secondary status and aspire to be read as forms of writing no less creative and original than what generally passed under the name of “literature.”

This was the institutional and intellectual context in which the midrash-theory connection was forged. Essentially, two types of scholars were involved in making the connection: on the one side were a few younger students and scholars in Jewish studies, many of whom (myself included) had entered the field with academic backgrounds in either English or comparative literature, and on the other were several critics and theorists from the general literary world (many though not all of them Jewish), a number of whom were very distinguished figures, thus lending a kind of immediate prestige to the new interest in midrash that it otherwise never would have possessed. For all their differences, both groups of scholars found themselves fascinated by precisely the same wayward, antic features of midrashic interpretation that had often been considered scandalous in the past. The typical midrashic predilection for multiple interpretations rather than for a single truth behind the text, its irresistible desire to tear out the nuances of Scripture rather than use interpretation to close them off, and, most of all, the way midrashic discourse mixes text and commentary, violating the boundaries between them and intentionally blurring their differences, flourishing precisely in the grayish no-man’s-land between exegesis and literature—all these features
that once had seemed (since the time of Maimonides at least) to be the most problematic and irrational aspects of midrash now became its most intriguing, fascinating qualities.

Within Jewish studies, the sudden flurry of interest in midrash was almost unprecedented. For the first time in memory, the academy seemed to be authentically excited about something Jewish—other than the Hebrew Bible, of course, which long ago had been appropriated by Christian scholars, even in its most recent avatar as “Bible as literature.” Although the midrash-theory connection followed closely on the latter’s heel—and was to a certain extent enabled and facilitated by its academic success—the literary approach to midrash was also inherently different from the Bible-as-literature movement (in all its varieties). Essentially, the literary approach to the Bible was an effort to use the concept of “literature” as a way of “saving” the Bible, of reconstituting the wholeness of the biblical text, of recapturing a textual integrity and coherence that had been shattered by modern critical and historical study of the Bible. For at least some of its practitioners, the literary approach also provided a means for recuperating the humanistic significance of the Bible as a cultural artifact. By placing the Bible under the purview of “literature,” it became possible to argue for its continuing cultural authority as a secular document without adopting a purely historicizing, inevitably distancing and estranging, stance toward its meaning. In contrast, the midrash-theory connection was less an attempt to “save” midrash than it was an effort to find a genealogy, a precursor, for theory itself. As an interdisciplinary linkage, the connection presumed that midrash was in some sense an embryonic form of theory, a mode of interpretation that must be understood alongside other modes of interpretive method and practice. It was thus less an attempt to use “literature” to recuperate the meaning of midrash as an effort to show that midrash, too, was literature. Indeed, the implied argument was that learning to read midrash as a mode of discourse might even enhance our notion of what literature is, or could be. Thus, the transgressive character of midrash—the nonchalance with which it consistently violates the boundaries between text and commentary—was certainly one source of the powerful fascination that midrash commanded among post-structuralist theorists. Moreover, the interdisciplinary linkage between midrash and theory could itself claim some of that same transgressiveness. This quality of the slightly forbidden was only enhanced by the Gothic, Byzantine complexity of midrashic discourse, its unassimilated foreignness, which may have seemed to represent a kind of right Judaism that heretofore had scarcely been tolerated within the proper and Protestant walls of the American university, let alone allowed full admission into its corridors.

To be certain, the interdisciplinary nature of the linkage between midrash and literary theory soon led to tension. Students of midrash, despite their commitment to theory, were interested mainly in using it as an instrument for opening up midrash, as a tool for clarifying and delineating their often baffling yet beguiling subject. Early on, however, they found that midrashic literature resisted many of the categories and phenomena that post-structuralist theory had initially seemed to open up for them. For example, the notion of indeterminacy was not as helpful as many had first supposed it would be for understanding midrashic polysemy, a subject I discuss at length in chapter 1. In this way, the act of studying midrash from the perspective of theory itself became a process of distancing, even of disillusionment with theory’s imperializing claim that it could comprehend and subsume all writing.

Still, the vantage point that theory offered from which to view midrash, along with its value as a lexicon of critical terminology and conceptual categories, was revolutionary. An entirely new vision of the field was revealed. In a short time articles and books appeared using narratology, rhetorical criticism, and semiotics to analyze midrashic texts, other studies sought to apply such critical notions as intertextuality, Bakhtinian dialogics, and methodologies drawn more eclectically from both philosophical and theological hermeneutics, from thinkers like Gadamer and Ricoeur, to the task of theorizing midrash. The contributions of these studies, both large and small, were substantive, even though the question still remained as to the degree to which midrash was, in fact, susceptible to theorizing—that is, to being systematically analyzed and described within any single conceptual framework, no matter how flexible or eclectic. In some cases, the very recalcitrance and obscurity of the midrashic texts themselves, as well as their generic status as documents, called into doubt the very conclusions such “theories” of midrash wished to draw.

On the other side of the linkage, literary critics and theoreticians also encountered resistance to the project. For one thing, they had their own agenda in studying midrash. Especially for critics whose approaches were aligned more closely with deconstruction, part of that agenda was a desire to create an alternative interpretive tradition, a way to combat the logocentric that, so it was argued, had ruled literary discourse in the West, or, as it was sometimes called, the Greco-Christian tradition. As it was constructed, this alternative nonlogocentric tradition was said to begin with midrash (or with the Hebrew Bible as a kind of proto-midrashic text) and to end with deconstruction.

It became clear early on that there were difficulties with this construction. For one thing, the opposition between midrash and logocentric interpretation, which was largely identified with the allegorical tradition, was essentially a new recasting of the age-old battle between Hebraism and Hellenism. Yet the latter, one of the commonplacecs of Western cultural history, presents special difficulties when it is applied to the history of Judaism and its culture. Foremost among these is the fact that classical Judaism, the Judaism of the Rabbis who created midrash, was itself (as scholars over the last century have definitively established) a fusion that...
derived from the confrontation between native Israelite tradition and Hellenism, the culture of ancient Greece and Rome.\footnote{That is to say, Rabbinic Judaism is already a mixture, a mingling of Israelite, or biblical, and Greco-Roman elements. And so it is its foremost literary creation, midrash. Far from being inherently opposed to allegory, midrash is at times—though not always and certainly not exclusively—deeply allegorical in its modes of interpretation.}

Further, the connection between midrash and deconstruction—the alpha and omega, as it were; of this nonlogocentric tradition of interpretation—presumed a historical bond that was impossible to trace, let alone prove. The link became even more tenuous when many of the presumed similarities between midrash and poststructuralism—like those between modern textual indeterminacy and midrashic polysemy—were found to be, on closer examination, not as similar as initially thought.

Inevitably, the emotional and intellectual investments that both types of new readers of midrash brought to their studies created conflicts and tensions. In the very course of interdisciplinary dialogue, as midrash specialists pointed out the flaws in some of the theorists' presuppositions, they (the specialists) suddenly found themselves cast into the role of jealous guardians of the temple, while the theorists felt they were being portrayed as trespassers in the holy precinct. On the other hand, the theorists sought to depict themselves as the authentic heirs of the midrashic tradition; this, after all, was the essence of their claim to the continuity between the midrashic tradition and the poststructuralist stance. From this perspective, the midrash specialists were revealed to be closet positivists, old-fashioned philologists incapable of acknowledging the truly radical originality of midrash and concerned only with defending their scholarly turf. The specialists responded to this accusation, in turn, by claiming that, far from trying to prevent access to their subject, they were simply trying to do justice to its real uniqueness, which was inextricably tied to its difficult, often philologically problematic, complexity\footnote{A good part of this conflict may have been an inevitable by-product of interdisciplinary study in the contemporary university setting. Indeed, the case of midrash and literature was an almost perfect exemplification of the strengths and weaknesses of interdisciplinaryity. It showed the kinds of fresh insights that "outsiders," nonspecialists, are able to bring to a field, and the flaws that such radical and original insights may have precisely because their authors are not specialists. To be sure, such difficulties can occur in any interdisciplinary project, but they are most likely to arise in fields like midrash that, because of their unique philological characteristics, require some type of specialized training in order to be able to master their texts (although the tyranny and monomania of specialization is also the most compelling reason why such fields can benefit greatly from the distanced view that only a nonspecialist can provide).}.

Nonetheless, the conflict that developed, even if inevitable, was truly unfortunate, because it obscured the extent to which both sides shared an appreciation of midrash as a truly rich and complex form of literature to be read in its own right, not merely as a commentary on the Bible or as an adjunct to some other field of inquiry. It also obscured the degree to which both types of new readings of midrash represented a decisive break with the way midrash had been studied in the academy since the establishment of Die Wissenschaft des Judentums, the ancestor of modern Jewish studies, in the early nineteenth century. Indeed, in the eyes of more traditional scholars in Rabbinics, both camps—the so-called "literary midrashic specialists" and the "theorists interested in midrash"—were equally suspect, similarly dismissed as jargon-mongers whose writings mystified their subjects more than they made substantive—"scientific"—contributions to our knowledge of midrash. For these scholars, the literary approach in any of its varieties seemed more like postmodern homiletics than real scholarship, that is, the type of scholarship that had "rescued" midrash from the dustbin of religious obscurantism when, with the collapse of traditional Jewish life and the onset of modernity, much of classical Jewish literature had been threatened by oblivion.

The truth is that the new literary approach to midrash was not the beginning of the modern study of midrash. Nor had midrash been neglected or suppressed before its discovery by the literary scholars and critics (as, say, Jewish mystical literature is often said to have been suppressed by the apologetic rationalism of Jewish scholarship before its great recovery earlier in this century). In fact, the recovery and rehabilitation of midrash (along with its generic corollary, aggadah, that is, Rabbinic legend or lore) had been one of Wissenschaft's major projects. Perhaps the single greatest work to be produced by the entire school of Wissenschaft was Leopold Zunz's Die gottesdienstlichen Vorträge der Juden historisch entwickelt, a work that raised the "Science of Judaism" to the rank of a scholarly discipline and remains to this day the most complete literary history of midrashic literature.\footnote{Following Zunz, one can trace a line of important scholars of midrash in both America and Israel who laid the groundwork for recognition of its literariness. Among these, special mention should be made of three individuals: Isaac (Yitzhak) Heinemann and Max Kadushin, who independently made the first (and somewhat similar) efforts at presenting "theories" of midrash that departed radically from traditional hermeneutical approaches; and Joseph Heinemann, who, although not a theoretician or trained critic, brought an acute literary sensitivity to the study of midrash.\footnote{In the early 1970s, Heinemann was appointed to a professorship in midrash in the department of Hebrew literature at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. This was perhaps the ultimate sign that midrash had "arrived" as a fully recognized subject within the Jewish literary curriculum.} Even so, the midrash-theory connection was different. Despite all the recognition that its literary features had received, midrash was still largely studied in...}
the university within departments of Rabbinic literature, as a province of Talmudic literature, and with an emphasis on law over lore. And even when it was studied in these ways, midrash, like Talmud, was treated primarily as a foundational document of Judaism, important either for its religious value and meaning or as an ancient source to be mined for historical and philological information about early Judaism and Christianity. Where it was recognized for its exegetical interest, this was almost exclusively for the purposes of comparative exegesis, the tracing of the history of a given interpretation through different historical periods and religious traditions. Important as such study was, it ignored almost entirely the form of midrash, concentrating instead on its substance, the content of exegesis. On the other hand, when more literary-minded scholars did try to study midrash as "literature," they tended to do so at the expense of its exegetical dimension, which was viewed as being iminal in some way to its so-called literary features.

In contrast, the new literary study of midrash aimed to demonstrate that midrash was a literature of interpretation, that its literary character was intrinsically bound up with its exegetical dimension. More than that, it sought to show how midrash could be viewed as the embodiment of an authentic, native Jewish creativity, which, it was now understood, was in no way iminal to the exegetical tradition within Judaism. To the contrary, midrash became the paradigm for exegesis as a creative religious and imaginative act. This recognition was, arguably, the single most important contribution of the midrash-theory connection. But what was most remarkable about this new perception—the ability to see the process of interpretation not only as the method but also as the very essence of the literary nature of midrash—is that it was made possible only through exposure to modernist writers and critics like Franz Kafka, Jorge Luis Borges, Walter Benjamin, and Roland Barthes, whose writings similarly compound text and exegesis. If we had not first learned how to read these modernists, we would never have known how to read midrash. They provided the lens through which we were first able to recognize the singular literary-exegetical features that are visible in midrash as well as in modernist texts.

The moment of interdisciplinary excitement I have sketched out here has now largely passed. With the demise of deconstruction, literary theorists—among notable exceptions like Geoffrey Hartman, whose work and personal example have exerted a major influence upon the field—seem to have lost interest in midrash and in other aspects of classical Judaism and its literature. Harold Bloom has turned his attention from Kabbalah and its relation to criticism to a wholesale Gnostic rejection of all "normative" Judaism (which suggests how little Bloom ever understood about Kabbalah's presence within "normative" Judaism). More sadly, Jewish studies, no longer understood as the repressed or suppressed "other" of Western culture, is now perceived as part of the hegemonic cultural imperialism that has suppressed and continues to suppress all the minority voices within that culture, the supposedly authentic voices of multiculturalism and pluralism.

Yet whatever its fate in the larger literary theoretical world, the midrash-theory connection has had a lasting impact on the study of midrash. Indeed, now that the buzz and flurry of the initial excitement has passed, the time has arrived to reap the fruits of the original linkage and to begin the real work of reading midrash theoretically, as literary discourse—that is, to use the theoretical sophistication appropriated from literary studies to describe midrash's literary forms in their specificity and full complexity, to use the language of midrash as the base from which to discuss its hermeneutics in the light of the history of interpretation, and, perhaps most importantly, to employ our growing knowledge of the social, religio-political, and gender constructions of literature in order to analyze the singular forms of Rabbinc writing. The chapters in this book seek to offer modest examples of what such a work of reading might entail, and of the different kinds of theoretical and literary challenges that it inevitably faces.

The full impact of the midrash-theory connection has not been limited to the field of midrash scholarship alone. Its repercussions have spread not only into such cognate areas as Talmud, Kabbalah, and medieval Hebrew literature, but also into the field of Jewish studies as a whole, for which midrash has, in effect, functioned as a kind of avant-garde, an advance force through which Jewish studies as a discipline has engaged the frontiers of the humanities within the American university. Indeed, the impact of the interdisciplinary linkage upon Jewish studies has been so great that it is worth reflecting for a moment upon its significance and especially why its ripplelike effects have been so extensive.

I would suggest that a good part of the reason for this has to do with the identity politics of Jewish studies, namely, the ways in which the modern academic and critical study of Judaism, since its inception in Wissenschaft, has participated in shaping Jewish selfhood in the modern world. As many historians have noted, modern Jewish scholarship has always served diverse ideological purposes. In its earlier periods alone, these purposes ranged from Moritz Steinschneider's somewhat overworked formulation that the duty of the historian is to give "the remains of Judaism a decent burial," to functioning as a tool of emancipation and assimilation into Western culture, or serving as an instrument for the reform and revivification of Judaism.

Somewhat more intimately, the study of the past has also worked as "a personal exercise in group genealogy," as the historian David Myers has written. Since the Enlightenment, Jewish scholars have explored their Jewishness through intellectual immersion in the foundational texts of the past, from the Bible through the great medieval classics, even though they have ceased to believe in those texts the way that the texts claim their readers must. That is to say, since the beginning of the modern period, the critical study of Jewish texts has been a primary mode of
establishing Jewishness as a secular identity. This was certainly the case with the modern study of midrash from Zunz's time onward.

It was precisely here, however, that the new literary study of midrash differed not only from more traditional midrash scholarship but also from the mainstream of Jewish studies. "The primary intellectual encounter between Judaism and modern culture has been precisely in a mutual preoccupation with the historicity of things," Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi has written in his eloquent study of Jewish history and memory, Zekhur. Most modern Jewish scholarship, indeed most intellectual concern with things Jewish, has been dominated by the study of history, with the recovery and reconstruction of the Jewish past in its fullness. Yet precisely because of this historicist orientation, as Yerushalmi has lamented, the modern Jewish historian (read scholar) cannot escape "the ironic awareness that the very mode in which he or she delves into the past 'represents a decisive break with that past.'" This is the modern Jewish scholar's malaise. If history, in Yerushalmi's apt formulation, has been "the faith of fallen Jews," it has been a faith that has not been able to recreate the wholeness of our forebears' belief, nor has it been able to heal the wounds that modernity has inflicted upon the collective Jewish memory, indeed upon collective Jewish existence.

To some extent, the midrash-theory connection sought to overcome this melancholy awareness of the failure of historicism. Not exactly theological in its tenor but not without some implicit theological aspirations, not entirely oblivious to historical considerations but not at all antiquarian in its orientation, the midrash-theory connection hoped to discover in midrash a form of Jewish creativity that could be transmissible, reclaimable, in a way that purely historicist knowledge about the Jewish past could never be. Undoubtedly, part of this desire to find in literature a form of creativity that could somehow defeat history and offer a kind of surrogate for the wholeness, the spiritual redemption, once offered by religion was a vestige of late Romanticism and on that count perhaps doomed to frustration from the beginning. Nor am I suggesting that it was ever possible for midrash scholarship—whether of the new literary or the more traditional philological variety—to escape the dilemma of historicism (any more than the literary approach to the Bible succeeded in avoiding a confrontation with more historicist readings of the biblical text). Nonetheless, the persistence of the desire to overcome the knowledge of a decisive break with the past—a break in whose shadow we live—and to find in midrash a kind of hermeneutical meta-narrative that would transcend the ironic awareness of history is powerful testimony to the dissatisfaction with pure historicism as a mode of Jewish intellectual conduct.

The genuine vitality that characterized the midrash-theory connection, the sheer intellectual excitement of the encounter, attests to the possibility of finding within Jewish tradition a mode of creativity that is more than just historical knowledge, that is still able to evoke real excitement among contemporary Jews.

We must not, of course, exaggerate the impact of the midrash-theory connection. Even if it is true that the university is the primary site in the world today for original and creative thinking on questions of Jewishness (be they theological or demographic in orientation), we would do well to remember how restricted and limited the academic world can be. As one writer has said recently about the possibility of midrash to serve as a source for contemporary religious discourse, "Outside the world of the academy, in the lives of Jews who know very little about this literature, midrash is a strange animal. There is in these texts a whole dimension of difficulty." This includes not only the inability to accept the beliefs that undergird midrash—its assumptions about the nature of Torah, for example, as a divinely authored text—and its religious messages, which may or may not conform to our ideas of Jewish faith (if we identify as Jews, and even less obviously if we do not). Even more importantly, the reading of midrash, because of the obscure, sometimes arcane nature of its texts, inevitably disappoints and frustrates the expectations of personal meaningfulness that a reader who is not an academic brings to these texts, the hunger to have these texts connect immediately to one's identity (or, we should add with some sadness, not connect at all).

The critic Harold Bloom has diagnosed the problem even more grimly. "I contemplate my many students," Bloom has written, "and I reflect on how many of them are Jewish in one way or another: confusedly, ambivalently, and partly. That is the way things are, the way they are going to be. What offers itself as normative Judaism does not speak to them, as it does not speak to me." In place of "normative" Judaism—and midrash is clearly part of "normative" Judaism—Bloom offers the triad of Franz Kafka, Sigmund Freud, and Gershom Scholem as the contemporary canon of "high Jewish culture," of what he calls "Jewishness without Judaism." But it is essentially Bloom's challenge to the "normative" tradition that every student of midrash must take seriously. Namely, can midrash speak to us today?

I would propose that it is precisely here that the midrash-theory connection can teach us: not by showing how to reclaim the substance of midrash or its methodology of reading, but by serving as a model for how theory can actively engage the classical "normative" tradition, and, once having engaged it, find the tradition more valuable and meaningful in its own right. For is the search for selfhood that led literary scholars to midrash so different in the end from the desire of laypersons to have these texts do something for them by revealing part of the mystery, the perplexity, of their existence as Jews? In both cases, what was and continues to be sought is a way to reclaim these texts for ourselves.

Ironically, Bloom's own early work in Kabbalah and Criticism might be instructive here as exemplifying the very process through which theory can participate in this act of recovery. For while Bloom acknowledges that Kabbalah did not lead him to his theories of literary influence, there can be no question that Bloom gained his "feel" for Kabbalah—and his ability to communicate to his readers
the palpable sense of the psychic energies that pulsate through those esoteric mystical bloodlines—from his knowledge of the history of post-Romantic poetry. His most brilliant intuition was to talk about Kabbalah as though it were poetry. And precisely because what he says about poetry is so compelling (at least to the reader initiated into the mysteries of Bloomian criticism), Bloom's travel guide to Kabbalah was able to afford access to its hidden paths through his revisionist, Gnostic, and Oedipal routes with an immediacy that has often eluded more conventional scholarship.

The questions that literary theory will raise when it turns to the tradition will concern "how deeply or feebly the tradition is reading its sources," as Geoffrey Hartman has aptly written.26 Only by seeing how deeply the tradition reads its sources will we be able to learn to read the tradition deeply for ourselves. In this book I try to offer a model for how such questioning and reading might proceed so as to involve the tradition and ourselves in meaningful exchange. The book consists of four such exchanges on central topics in the study of midrash. Although it is not intended to be either an introduction to midrash for literary theorists or a primer in theory for midrash scholars, I have tried to write it in such a way that the book will be accessible and challenging to readers on both sides of the midrash-theory linkage, that is, sufficiently sophisticated to interest those with more training in either Rabbinics or literary theory and yet not so technical as to scare off scholars in one field who may be less familiar with the mysteries of the other.

The chapters in the book form a progression, but each one may also be read as an essay in its own right, which is indeed the way they were originally written and published. In preparing this book, I have revised the separate essays so as to knit them together into an extended discussion, but I have deliberately not attempted to do away with their essayistic nature. By calling these chapters essays, I mean, quite literally, that they are essays or attempts, that is, literary experiments in exploring an idea or text, in laying out the parameters of a problem, rather than more ambitious efforts aimed at resolving difficulties once and forever.

As a scholarly genre, the interpretive essay is a medium that, unfortunately, has not found a large place for itself in Jewish studies. In general, the field has favored either the scholarly article or the monograph, both of them more fitting vehicles for Wissenschaft, the "science" of Judaism, with its claims to precise and comprehensive knowledge. To be sure, authority and essayistic writing need not be exclusive. Gershom Scholem's great interpretive essays—"Revelation and Tradition as Religious Categories in Judaism," for example, or any of the essays in Kabbalah and its Symbolism—are positive evidence to the contrary.27 But the essay, by its very form, points in a different intellectual direction than the monograph—toward intellectual speculation and discovery rather than conclusive formulation and summary.

It would be presumptuous for any scholar to compare him- or herself to Scholem, but if the chapters in this book have any model, it is Scholem's great essays. Those essays, like the ones I have mentioned, epitomize scholarship that is, as George Steiner once wrote about Scholem's work, of "the life-giving kind."28 Scholem's writing remains the most powerful testimony to the capacity of modern Jewish scholarship to transcend its secondary status as commentary on the classics of the past and to become a source of Jewish creativity in its own right—that is, to be able to embody the meaningfulness of Jewish tradition (even without necessarily subscribing to its content). To be sure, the power of Scholem's writing lay in many things: his magisterial learning and intelligence, his capacity for reconstructing the hidden myth at the heart of Kabbalistic doctrine, his genius for seeing the historical ramifications of these most arcane ideas in the farthest reaches of culture. But as sources to be read in their own right, perhaps the deepest measure of their power lay in the proven ability of Scholem's writings to inspire their readers—not to become Kabbalists themselves or to take up mystical beliefs and practices, but to go back to the tradition, to study its texts for themselves and, thereby, in some way, to partake of the power and fascination of Kabbalah on their own. If this book, too, can inspire only a few of its readers to read (or reread) midrash on their own, it will have more than justified its writing.
Chapter 1

Midrash and Hermeneutics:
Poliysemy vs. Indeterminacy

No questions have figured more prominently in the contemporary study of midrash than those of its hermeneutics. Is there a logic to interpretation in midrash, a set of rules or exegetical conventions governing the free play of its commentaries? Are those rules or their logic different from those of other interpretive traditions, and if so, what are those differences and what do they mean?

These questions are important not only because of what their answers might teach us about midrash. They also point to one of the primary reasons why midrash has fascinated students of literature and literary theory in general. Indeed, since that interest was first expressed some fifteen years ago, scholars have been trying to find in midrash an alternative to the various "logocentric" hermeneutical traditions, like that of allegoresis, that have dominated Western literary culture since antiquity. As a result, the urge to define the hermeneutics of midrash has been invested almost from the beginning with a desire to locate in Rabbinic exegesis a hermeneutic embodying Otherness.

This project has encountered many challenges. Among these, perhaps the most interesting has been the basic question that can be addressed to the entire post-structuralist project and to deconstruction in particular: Is there "any other way that thinking may operate beyond or outside the enclosure of logocentrism?"

This was precisely the question Zhang Longxi posed in a masterful study that explores the parallels between deconstruction and classical Chinese hermeneutics, a parallel that Jacques Derrida himself was among the first to invoke. After subjecting Derrida's claims for the similarity of the two systems to the test of the Chinese perspective, Zhang disputes their validity, pointing out in the process a lengthy train of misinterpretations of Chinese thought by Western thinkers, among whom Derrida is only the most recent.

The deeper question raised by Zhang's argument, however, concerns the desire that led Derrida to invoke the Chinese model in the first place. That question, in turn, raises still other matters for inquiry, matters that in their broadest terms concern our every intellectual effort to look at non-Western culture through the lens of Western critical categories. If the essential theme of the Western
hermeneutical tradition has been the challenge involved in understanding the Other, then cultures outside the West and their hermeneutical traditions would seem to epitomize Otherness. Yet granting that it is impossible for the subject (the interpreter) ever to achieve total identification with the object of interpretation (non-Western culture/its hermeneutical tradition/a document of interpretation in that tradition), how then does one proceed to understand the Other without distorting it in the very name of Otherness?

In dealing with cultures that have developed more or less independently of the West—like China or Africa, for example—the solutions to these methodological problems may more likely derive from literary anthropology than from pure theory. 2 The case of midrash raises still other considerations, however, since classical Rabbinc exegesis, like Rabbinc Judaism itself, was not so much completely "other" to, or apart from, Western culture as it was a marginal presence upon its borders, a tradition that developed by drawing upon Western categories and transforming them without becoming wholly absorbed by them. Historically, Rabbinc Judaism arose in late antiquity out of the fusion between ancient Near Eastern Israelite tradition and Hellenism. Not surprisingly, then, its literature, including midrash, borrowed from both the biblical and the classical literary traditions, yet managed to create for itself a fully distinct identity that exists in a kind of intermediate space between the conventional genres of Western literature.

Needless to say, any study of midrash must be able to encompass this complex historical etiology. No attempt will ever be sufficient that presents midrash and its hermeneutics in simple opposition to logocentrism, with the latter being characterized as a Greco-Roman or Christian development and the former as a Jewish one. To read midrash as a rewriting of Derrida, Jacques Lacan, or Edmond Jabes is equally misguided. The alternative, however, is not to study midrash through its own methods, which is essentially the way it has been read within traditional Jewish circles since the Middle Ages; rather, it is to approach midrash with a theoretical interest, fully prepared to take a stance toward literary theory roughly analogous to the marginal stance midrash (and Rabbinc Judaism) historically assumed in relation to the intellectual categories of Hellenism (and, in subsequent Jewish history, both Christianity and Islam), that is, simultaneously receptive and resistant to their universalist ambitions. Such an approach to midrash would be open to the categories of literary theory, yet conscious of their Otherness and ready to transform them by recontextualizing them.

In this chapter, I wish to investigate one aspect of midrash that has frequently been proposed as an antecedent or counterpart of the concept of indeterminacy as it has figured in post-structuralist literary theory, namely, its conception of Scriptural polysemy and its consequent habit of presenting multiple interpretations for Scriptural verses or phrases. As I hope to show, multiple interpretation in midrash bears little connection to the notion of indeterminacy, nonetheless, indeterminacy may still remain a significant category for understanding our reading of midrashic discourse. This lack of equivalence between midrash and the theoretical categories we use to read it may not be purely negative knowledge. Aside from the sheer antiquarian interest in understanding the midrashic phenomenon within its historical context, it may help us see a little more clearly the very conditions of our own theorizing.

Any consideration of the relationship between theory and midrash might do well to begin with the difference between the self-reflexivity of contemporary theory—thought turned in upon its own operations—and that of midrash, in which even theoretical statements about exegesis are couched in the language of Scriptural exegesis. No better example of the midrashic habit exists than the Rabbinc traditions about Scriptural polysemy. The locus classicus for these traditions is preserved in the Talmud, where they are cited in the course of a debate over the question as to whether or not one party may invoke multiple biblical verses in support of its position in a legal dispute, the assumption being that two prooftexts make a stronger case than one. Many sages appear to have opposed this practice, however, and accordingly the Talmud cites two sayings, the first attributed to Abaye, a fourth-century Babylonian sage, and the second to the School of Rabbi Ishmael, a Palestinian sage who lived approximately two centuries earlier.

Abaye said: The verse says, "Once God has spoken, but twice I have heard" (Ps. 62:12). A single verse has several senses, but no two verses ever hold the same meaning.

It was taught in the School of Rabbi Ishmael: "Behold, My word is like fire—declares the Lord—and like a hammer that shatters rock" (Jer. 23:29). Just as this hammer produces many sparks [when it strikes the rock], so a single verse has several meanings.

Both of these interpretations make much the same point, but they derive it from separate verses in very different ways. The Psalms verse, which in its original context serves as an affirmation of God's faithfulness and justice, is understood by Abaye as saying, in effect, "One thing God has spoken but two things I have heard," with the Hebrew words avot and shlayim read not abverbially ("once" and "twice") but as substantives. In the case of the School of Rabbi Ishmael's saying, the verse from Jeremiah also has a meaning in its Scriptural context very different from the interpretation the sages give it. They understand Jeremiah's declaration as describing not the experience of prophecy but the substance of that experience, the content of prophetic revelation, specifically its literary product, the text of Scripture. This reading derives from what is for the Rabbis a genuine
problem in the verse, namely, the presence of the two similes. The Rabbis always undertake their study of the Bible with the assumption that every word in Scripture is both necessary and significant. If this is so, however, why does the prophet use two similes for God's word, both fire and a hammer? The answer—in effect, the interpretation—given by the School of Rabbi Ishmael can be paraphrased as follows: My word, says God, is like fire; but what sort of fire? Like those fiery sparks produced by a hammer when it strikes rock—and like the many senses that every verse in Scripture holds ready to let fly at the strike of the interpretive hammer.4

The idea of Scriptural polysemy presented in these two sayings represents a virtual ideological cornerstone of midrashic exegesis. The concept does not appear to have changed or developed perceptibly through the classical Rabbinic period, and its use characterizes statements of both halakhah, Rabbinic law, and aggadah, the more homiletical and narrative portion of Rabbinic tradition. (If anything, polysemy is more frequent in aggadah than in halakhah.) Elsewhere in Rabbinic literature, the idea is expressed more allusively, often as a function of a stock number, usually seven or a multiple of seven. A statement in one midrash collection, Bamidbar (Numbers) Rabbah, thus refers to the seventy aspects (panim) of the Torah, while a later collection, Midrash Rabbi Eliezer, refers to the forty-nine senses of Scripture. The Alphabet of Rabbi Akiba, a semimystical tract of the early post-Talmudic period, describes how Moses was instructed on Mount Sinai in “all seventy aspects of the seventy languages” of the Torah. This idea, however, is already suggested in the Talmud, in a passage that relates how on Mount Sinai “every commandment [dibbur] that went forth from the mouth of the Almighty was divided into seventy tongues.”5 As any student of midrash knows, the presentation of multiple interpretations (often, though not always, prefaced by the formula another interpretaion) is its most ubiquitous feature, almost a kind of stereotype or commonplace.

The notion of Scriptural polysemy raises several questions: If every verse has several meanings, what did the Rabbis believe was the meaning of Scripture? Did the Bible even have a determinate sense for the Rabbis, or did they consider it essentially an open text, an unbounded field for the unlimited play of interpretation? If so, was any interpretation of Scripture valid? Or did there exist exegetical criteria, constraints upon the free activity of Scriptural interpretation, and if so, what were they? In the case of contradictory, mutually exclusive, or opposed exegeses, what criteria existed for resolving conflicts of interpretation?

We may begin by addressing the last question first, since it is explicitly discussed in the following passage, a homily attributed to another early sage of the second century, Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah, as recorded in the Talmudic tractate Hagigah:

[Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah] recited this poem: “The words of the wise are like goads; like nails well-planted are the words of masters of assemblies, they were given by one shepherd” (Eccles. 12:11). Why are the words of the Torah likened to a goad? To teach you that just as the goad directs the heifer along its furrow to bring forth life to the world, so the words of the Torah direct those who study them from the paths of death to the paths of life. But [you might think that] just as the goad can move [and be removed], so the words of the Torah move [and can be removed]—therefore the text says: “nails” (which once nailed down cannot be removed). But [you might think that] just as the nail only diminishes [as it is pounded into wood] and does not increase, so, too, the words of the Torah only diminish and do not increase—therefore the text says “well-planted” just as a plant grows and increases, so the words of Torah grow and increase. [What does the phrase “the masters of assemblies” mean?] These are the disciples of the wise who sit in assemblies and study the Torah, some pronouncing unclean and others pronouncing clean, some permitting and others permitting, some declaring unfit and others declaring fit—should a man say: Since some pronounce unclean and others pronounce clean, some prohibit and others permit, some declare unfit and others declare fit—then shall I learn Torah? Therefore Scripture says: All of them were given from one shepherd.” One God gave them, one leader (i.e., Moses) proclaimed them from the mouth of the Lord of all creation, blessed be He, as it is written, “And God spoke all these words” (Exod. 20:1). Therefore make your ear like the hopper and acquire a perceptive heart to understand the words of those who pronounce unclean and the words of those who pronounce clean, the words of those who prohibit and the words of those who permit, the words of those who declare unfit and the words of those who declare fit.6

This passage is a proem, or petihah, a common midrashic literary form that probably derived from brief sermons delivered in the synagogue immediately before the weekly reading from Scripture. We will discuss this form in greater detail in chapter 3. For now we need only say that the structure of the proem is highly conventional: it nearly always concludes with the initial verse in the weekly reading (here, Exod. 20:1), and virtually always opens with a verse taken from a completely different and unrelated context in Scripture (here, Eccles. 12:11). After citing this latter verse, the preacher interprets it in such a way as to build a connection or bridge to the concluding verse. Because the audience knows that verse in advance, the rhetorical shape of the form largely depends upon the unpredictability and virtuosity with which the preacher can make the connection between the two verses.
In this passage, Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah's interpretation of Eccles. 12:11 offers an almost perfect illustration of midrashic reading. The first place, the sage never has any doubt about the overall sense of the verse: "the words of the wise" can refer only to the teachings of the sages themselves. The exegetes task therefore does not involve disclosing a less obvious, hidden, or revisionist meaning for the verse; rather, it consists of unpacking the significance of each separate simile or phrase in the verse. That significance, charactenstically, is assumed to lie in a substantive contribution to meaning, not in figurative or ornamental novelty.

To unpack these points of significance, Rabbi Eleazar begins by "atomizing" the verse, interpreting each phrase as an independent hermeneutical item. Atomization, one of the most common exegetical techniques of midrash, proceeds from the assumption that every word and phrase in Scripture is as meaningful in itself as within its larger Scriptural context. Yet with each successive attempt to fix a meaning for the separate phrases, Rabbi Eleazar finds himself faced by an alternative meaning or implication that threatens to undo the interpretation he has just proposed. If the words of the Torah are truly like a goad on a beast of burden's neck, perhaps they, too, can be removed: To resolve this hermeneutical dilemma, Rabbi Eleazar uses another common midrashic technique: he revises his initial interpretation by interpreting Scripture through Scripture. In this passage, he does so by modifying the initial figure with the succeeding phrase in the verse, the following simile or figure. Thus, he is able to rebut the unforeseen and problematic implication of his previous interpretation likening Torah to a goad by invoking the next figure in the verse, in which the words of the wise are compared to nails, permanently and unalterably fixed. Following this revision, however, Rabbi Eleazar faces still another objection. If the words of Torah are like nails, do they also diminish (as they disappear into the wood into which they are hammered)? No; for they are like plants, they grow and increase. And so on.

In its overall sequence, this chain of interpretations suggests a unified or universal reading of Scripture rather than a truly polysemous one. In typical Rabbinic fashion, though, the very next interpretation in the passage offers an explicit formulation of polysemy. This is Rabbi Eleazar's interpretation for the phrase "the masters of assemblies," which he takes as a reference to the sages themselves as they study and debate the law—some pronouncing unclean, others clean, some prohibiting, others permitting, and so on. If this indeed is the case, the passage continues, a student might wonder, "How then can I learn Torah?" Rabbi Eleazar responds: There is no cause for despair. Although the sages' opinions may contradict each other, they all are part of Torah, part of a single revelation. They all were once spoken by the mouth of one shepherd, Moses, who in turn received them all from one God. Rabbi Eleazar's confirmation for this answer lies in the exegesis he offers for Exod. 20:1, the verse that serves as the introduction to the revelation at Sinai in which God gave the Ten Commandments—the basis of the complete Torah—to the children of Israel.

It should be noted that the student's question is not "How can I practice the law?" The answer to that question would be clear to any disciple of the Rabbis: where there is a difference of opinion regarding the correct law, the halakhah is decided by following the opinion of the majority of sages, a principle of jurisprudence the Rabbis elsewhere justify midrashically through an interpretation of Exod. 23:2, "after the majority incline." Rather than point to a practical quandary, the student's question and the hermeneutical despair underlying it derive from the chaos of the academy. If the Rabbis disagree about the meaning of every law and verse, if each and every law and verse can elicit opposite interpretations simultaneously, then why bother to study Torah?

This dilemma recalls still another passage, the famous description of the first-century schools or "houses" of Hillel and Shammal, named after the legendary Pharisaic sages. The two schools are typically remembered in Rabbinic tradition as engaging in endless debates.

Rabbi Abba said in the name of Samuel: For three years the House of Hillel and the House of Shammal argued. These said, The law is according to our view; and the others said, The law is according to our view. [Finally] a heavenly oracle decreed: The words of both houses are the words of the living God, and the law is like the House of Hillel.

The Talmud then asks, quite reasonably:

But if the words of both houses are the words of the living God, why did the House of Hillel merit having the halakhah decided according to its view? Because they were peaceful and humble men, and they taught the teachings of the House of Shammal as well as their own, and even more than that, they taught the teachings of the House of Shammal before they taught their own.

In other words, the halakhah was eventually decided according to the opinion of the House of Hillel not because its teachings were any more correct or valid than those of the House of Shammal, but for ethical reasons. Even though the House of Hillel disagreed with its opponents, it treated the House of Shammal with respect. Another tradition tells us that while the Houses of Hillel and Shammal disagreed over the legitimacy of children born from certain types of marriages, they still did not refrain from marrying each others' daughters—because, we are told, they preferred to practice the Scriptural command, "You must love truth and
peace" (Zech. 8:19). From a strictly hermeneutical perspective, however, both interpretations, even if they contradict each other, are considered equally true, identically alive to Torah's meaning, to the words of the living God.

The sanction for such paradoxical truth is explicitly stated in the homily of Rabbi Eleazar: it is the divine origin that both interpretations are said to share, the belief that the contradictory opinions of the two houses were both originally spoken by the mouth of the Lord of all creation. This divine sanction for Scriptural polysemy also differentiates the midrashic concept of polysemy from its post-structuralist counterpart, indeterminacy. By indeterminacy, I hasten to add, I do not mean nihilism, the sheer relativizing or negation of meaning as an infinitely deferred presence, or nonpresence. Instead, I refer to the concept as it has been subtly characterized by Geoffrey Hartman, as being close to the process of commentary itself, "the taking away, modification, elaboration of previous meanings." In this sense, midrashic reading can sometimes be, as in Rabbi Eleazar's interpretation of Eccles. 12:11, very close to a literary criticism predicated on indeterminacy. What differentiates midrash from indeterminacy is not its style but rather the latter's formal resistance to closure, its final revelation of a perspective that, as Hartman writes, "may be, precisely, the absence of one and only one context from which to view the flux of time or the empirical world, of one and only one method that would destabilize all but itself, of one and only one language to rule understanding and prevent misunderstanding." In contrast, midrashic polysemy is predicated precisely upon the existence of such a perspective, the divine presence from which all contradictory interpretations derive. Precisely what type of perspective this is we will try to say shortly.

The difference between Rabbinic polysemy and contemporary indeterminacy is fairly clear. What is more instructive, however, is the fact that the midrashic conception has no real parallel, so far as I know, even in other interpretive traditions in the ancient world that also approached the Bible as a divinely inspired text. Consider the example of the earliest datable literature of Jewish biblical exegesis, the fragments of commentaries found among the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran. The technical term for exegesis at Qumran is pesher, a Hebrew word cognate to Interpreta- tion, earliest datable literature of Jewish enemies, as well as to Rome, the Gentile scourge. In this exegesis there is little room for contradictory or multiple interpretations. Indeed, the apocalyptic force of the commentary, its persuasiveness as a political and religious document, depends directly on the absoluteness of its claim that each and every interpretation is true and that the contemporary meanings—the events and personages—that underlie the Scriptural text will exhaust that text's prophecy as soon as they come to pass in the imminent future. The same type of interpretation appears as well in the New Testament Gospels, in the so-called fulfillment prophecies in which verses from the Bible are cited as prophecies of events that are said to have been realized in the life of Jesus. The most famous of these prophecies is Matthew's misinterpretation of Isa. 7:14, "the maiden is with child and will soon give birth to a son whom she will call Immanuel," which Matthew understood as a prophecy fulfilled in the virgin birth.

As in Qumranic exegesis, many exegetical techniques in Rabbinic midrash can also be traced to various procedures of ancient dream interpretation. Yet the essential thrust of midrash toward finding multiple interpretations of Scripture could not be more opposed to the basic intentions of ancient dream interpretation. Unlike the exegetes of Qumran, the Rabbis appear to have repudiated the apocalyptic claims of apocalyptic fulfillment in favor of hermeneutical multiplicity. For example, the petirah, the cognate midrashic form I have mentioned, adapts for the form of the Qumranic pesher. Like the pesher, the petirah takes an ahistorical, generally abstract if not abstruse biblical verse, and applies it to a concrete and specific event. Unlike the pesher, however, the events interpreted in the pesher are not contemporary, certainly not imminent in the eschatological future, but rather, near apocalyptic past, as in the New Testament use of the fulfillment formula, they tend to be chosen from the distant past, usually from the biblical past in a realm of history that can be characterized best by its unthreatening distance from the interpreter. Furthermore, once again in contrast to Qumranic pesher, midrashic petirah, even when they are applied to the biblical narrative, are usually presented in series—not just one petirah, but two or three, sometimes as many as four or more. The apocalyptic and absolutist claims of Qumranic pesher have effectively been neutralized in midrash—in the religious-political as well as in the hermeneutical sphere—by a virtually ideological policy of polysemy.

Similarly, there are no real parallels to multiple interpretations of the post-structuralist and indeterminacy—there is little room for contradictory or multiple interpretations. In this exegesis there is little room for contradictory or multiple interpretations. Indeed, the apocalyptic force of the commentary, its persuasiveness as a political and religious document, depends directly on the absoluteness of its claim that each and every interpretation is true and that the contemporary meanings—the events and personages—that underlie the Scriptural text will exhaust that text's prophecy as soon as they come to pass in the imminent future. The same type of interpretation appears as well in the New Testament Gospels, in the so-called fulfillment prophecies in which verses from the Bible are cited as prophecies of events that are said to have been realized in the life of Jesus. The most famous of these prophecies is Matthew's misinterpretation of Isa. 7:14, "the maiden is with child and will soon give birth to a son whom she will call Immanuel," which Matthew understood as a prophecy fulfilled in the virgin birth.

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worlds. Classical allegoresis developed as an apologetic instrument of Stoic and Neoplatonic rationalizers of Homeric myth, and it was later utilized by Philo as a technique for the philosophical interpretation of Scripture. From its beginnings, allegory distinguished between and built upon two distinct levels of meaning: first, the literal or manifest meaning (la phainon); second, the underlying or deeper sense (he hypomonos). As early as Philo, however, this second level began to be subdivided into more subtle categories—the naturalistic, the ethical, the metaphysical or mystical—and these three subcategories eventually developed in medieval Christian exegesis into the famous fourfold senses of Scripture.

Yet while these traditions all seem to predicate multiple interpretation as a condition of exegesis, the different senses they find in Scripture actually represent a hierarchy of meanings rather than a truly polysemous range of interpretations, each one separate from the others. The medieval senses, rather than being distinct hermeneutical categories, are more like levels of interpretation that could in fact be ordered in an ascending ladder of significance. This is very different from the multiple interpretations of Scripture found in midrash. For example, Hab. 1:7, "That one is terrible, dreadful, its laws and majesty proceed from itself," a verse that in its original context refers to the Chaldeans, is interpreted in Yavikra (Leviticus) Rabbah 18:2 six different ways. According to the midrash, it refers, respectively, to Adam, Esau, Sennacharib, Hiram King of Tyre, Nebuchadnezzar, and the Israelites. Even if the interpretations relating to Esau, Sennacharib, Hiram, and Nebuchadnezzar all might be said to be versions of a single interpretive prototype—to refer to an enemy of God (as the first half of the verse is in effect interpreted) from whom a faithful servant of God eventually descended (as the second half of the verse is understood)—one could hardly use this categorization for the interpretations referring to Adam and to the Israelites. These two opinions do not even parallel each other. Or to give another example: on Lam. 3:10, "He is a lurking bear to me," a reference to the unnamed and cruel enemy who is torturing the speaker (an anonymous male personifying the nation of Israel), Eikhah (Lamentations) Rabbah offers two opinions regarding his historical identity. According to one, the bear is God, according to the other, it is Vespasian (the Roman general and emperor to whom the Rabbis attributed the major blame for the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E.). This last pair of interpretations represents the agadic equivalent to the opposed interpretations of the Houses of Hillel and Shammai in the realm of halakhah.

The closest analogue to midrashic polysemy that one can find in the Church Fathers is in Augustine. In one of the most inspired exegeses in the entire history of Scriptural interpretation, Augustine reads God's blessing to mankind "to be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1:22, 28) as an injunction to multiply interpretations of Scripture, "to express in manifold ways what we understand in but one, and to understand in manifold ways what we read as obscurely uttered in but one way."20 And certainly no medieval exegete delights more than Augustine does in multiple interpretations. For Gen. 1:24 alone he offers five different readings.21

Yet, even for Augustine, the possibility of multiple interpretations in Scriptural exegesis is less a function of an inherently polysemous sacred text than it is the result of the biblical author's own obscurity. That obscurity may possess divine sanction, but its presence nonetheless creates a hermeneutical dilemma for the biblical exegete, making it impossible for him or her to determine the originally intended meaning of a verse, and thereby leading the interpreter to invent other readings. For Augustine, however, this eventuality is not inherently dangerous so long as those other meanings represent the "truth" and are "congruous with the truth taught in other passages of the Holy Scriptures."22 By truth Augustine essentially means caritas, that "love of a Being which is to be enjoyed and of a being that can share that enjoyment with us," which serves him as a near rule of faith. While Augustine did not invent the rule of faith, he seems to have been among the first to use it to justify (rather than to prohibit) exegetical innovation. A person who understands Scripture in a way different from that intended by its author may therefore be deceived, but "if he is deceived in an interpretation which builds up caritas, which is the end of the commandments, he is deceived in the same way as a man who leaves a road by mistake but passes through a field to the same place towards which the road itself leads."23

To be sure, one could argue that Rabbinic Judaism also possesses a "rule of faith" under which all multiple interpretations are to be subsumed. The problem, however, is in stipulating in what this rule consists. If all the statements about faith that characterize Rabbinic Judaism were collected, they would more closely resemble the analogues of multiple interpretations for a single verse that are found in Rabbinic exegesis than a systematic exposition of religious beliefs. This feature of Rabbinic thought has led one modern Jewish theologian to describe its condition as "the indeterminancy of belief."24 At least since the time of Maimonides, Jewish philosophers have been aware of the Rabbis' apparent lack of interest in making a theologically coherent whole out of their disparate articles of faith. Only in the recent past, in fact, has the absence of a systematic theology come to be viewed as a virtue of Rabbinic Judaism rather than as a failure.

Those attempting to describe institutional controls on interpretation within the Rabbinic community face difficulties analogous to those seeking to define a rule of faith for Rabbinic Judaism. Such controls surely must have existed. Yet outside of the most obviously impossible cases—a reading of Isa. 7:14 as a prophecy of the virgin birth of Jesus as messiah—it is difficult to say precisely what lay beyond the borders of discourse. To be certain, most institutional controls work silently through what Frank Kermode has described as "the tacit knowledge of the permitted range of sense."25 Indeed, the literature of Rabbinic Judaism sometimes seems to have been edited almost intentionally to camouflage any
institutional constraints or conflicts. Yet while Rabbinic literature is replete with controversies and disagreements between Rabbis (one Rabbi may even accuse another of distorting the sense of Scripture), the fact remains that the objectionable or disputed interpretation is usually preserved within the Rabbinic corpus together with the unobjectionable or authoritative exegesis, both are handed down as equal words of the living God. There is little evidence to support the existence of explicit mechanisms for internal censorship in Rabbinic society.

Even so, the absence of a rule of faith in Rabbinic Judaism, or the impossibility of determining the institutional forces that may have controlled exegesis, does not mean that midrash was ever entirely open or unconstrained. For one thing, there appear to have existed schools of exegesis with distinct hermeneutical approaches or tendencies. There also existed "lists" of hermeneutical rules and exegetical techniques that reflect some awareness of the mechanisms of interpretation. These lists, however, were not composed to serve as how-to manuals for "doing" midrash; rather, scholars of Rabbinics today believe that they were more likely compiled at comparatively late dates by specific exegetical schools to legitimate their hermeneutical methods and to provide polemical documentation against competing exegetical schools (or competing religious groups, like the Karaite sect in the early Middle Ages). In practice, Rabbinic exegesis also turns out to be far less polysemous than some statements we have seen might lead us to expect. Many multiple interpretations, like the exegeses for Hab. 1 cited earlier, are actually versions of the same idea and recur in different contexts. Furthermore, while midrash may be unsystematic, its exegeses are not unmotivated. Even at its most apparently far-fetched or flamboyant moments, midrashic interpretations tend to be situated on genuine textual cruxes or irregularities, "bumps" in the plain surface of Scripture, a fact that militates against the worst excesses of unbridled polysemy. Finally, there appears to be a kind of underlying "deep structure" in midrash that both produces and governs multiple interpretations under specific exegetical conditions. This deep structure, as Betty Roitman has recently argued, "enacts at the level of interpretation a dialectic formulated on the ontological plane by Rabbi Akiba: 'All is foreseen, but freedom of choice is given.'" In midrash, Roitman writes, "all is determined, and yet all is open.

Roitman's theologized formulation suggests a possible direction in which to look for a model or explanation for the concept of polysemy in midrash. In contemporary criticism, textual meaning is often described spatially, in terms of its position either "behind" the text (the traditional logocentric view) or "in front" of it (from the perspective of deconstruction). In the case of Rabbinic Judaism, the divine guarantee of meaning in Scripture might be described more accurately as coming from above, not in the sense of divine elision or emanation but literally from on high, from the top of Mount Sinai, where, the Rabbis claimed, God gave Moses not only Scripture, "the written Torah" or the Pentateuch, but also an "oral Torah," passed on by mouth from generation to generation. That oral Torah effectively comprised everything in Rabbinic Judaism not explicitly stated in the written Torah. As revealed in its totality at Sinai, it included every multiple interpretation of Scripture, including, as one celebrated saying states, "the very words a disciple of the sages will speak before his teacher."

The two aspects of Torah, written and oral, are not exactly equivalent for the Rabbis, but together they form a unified, timeless entity with a single origin in the divine revelation. As we have already seen, certain Rabbinic traditions, like those describing every divine utterance at Sinai as having been issued in seventy tongues, seem to connect polysemy with the original revelation. Other traditions that describe God's external appearance at different moments when He manifested Himself to Israel have a family resemblance to the traditions about the polysemous meaning of Torah. Thus, in one famous passage, we are told that

God appeared to [the children of Israel] at the Red Sea like a hero in battle at Sinai like a scribe instructing them in Torah, and in the days of Daniel like an elderly teacher. [God] said to them: Just because you see Me in many images, this does not mean that there are many gods. . . . Said Rabbi Hanna ben Papa: God appeared to them with an angry face, with a neutral face, with a pleasant expression, and with a smiling face. Said Rabbi Levi: God appeared to them like a statue which looks in every direction. A thousand people look at it, and it looks at each of them. Thus, when God spoke to Israel, each Jew said: it is to me that the voice is speaking. Just as a single verse may have many meanings, so God, too, is said to possess many countenances.

A more explicit treatment of the connection between God and the Torah can be found in the following passage in Bereshit Rabbah, the midrash on the book of Genesis. The passage below, attributed to Rabbi Hoshaya, is the very first interpretation in the collection. Although its subject is Gen. 1:1, it begins with a series of interpretations of Prov 8:30, a verse that in its original context is spoken by Wisdom, an allegorical figure that the Rabbis identified with Torah.

Rabbi Hoshaya began: 'I was with Him as an amon [Translated in the Jewish Publication Society Tanakh as "a confidant"; in the Jerusalem Bible as "a master craftsman"], a source of delight every day, rejoicing before Him at all times' (Prov 8:30). The word amon means a tutor. Amon means "covered." Amon means "hidden." And some say it means "great." Each of these interpretations is based on a phonetic pun between the word amon and another, similarly-sounding word, verses from Scripture to support each interpretation are then cited for all four opinions. Another interpretation amon means an artisan.
The Torah declares: I was the instrument that the Holy One, blessed be He, used when He practiced His craft. It is customary that when a king of flesh and blood builds a palace, he doesn't build it himself but he hires an architect; even the architect doesn't build it solely from his head, but he uses plans and blueprints in order to know how to lay the rooms and to arrange the doors. So, too, the Holy One, blessed be He, looked into the Torah and created the world. And so the Torah said: "By means of [be-, a particle conventionally translated as "in"] the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth," and the word "beginning" always alludes to the Torah, as Scripture says, "The Lord created me at the beginning of His course" (Prov. 8:22).32

The word amon in the Proverbs verse happens to be a hapax legomenon, a fact that helps to explain Rabbi Hoshaya's puzzlement at its meaning and why so many interpretations are offered for it. Yet these multiple interpretations also exemplify the kind of wit one typically finds in midrash; indeed, in the second half of the opening Proverbs verse, Torah (Wisdom) is itself described explicitly in terms of this wit as God's constant joy and delight, something that entertains Him all day. As an interpretive activity, midrash is a form of study that is also an avenue of entertainment, playful and serious at once. Thus, all four interpretations of amon are based on ingenious if contrived puns. Yet each interpretation also presents a different conception of the Torah. One of these—the definition of amon as a tutor, a pidagog—may even allude poetically to a Christian doctrine. It recalls Paul's famous characterization of the law in Gal. 3:24 as a pidagogos whom God appointed over the Israelites, that is, a teacher or schoolmaster whose role, after the crucifixion, was superseded by faith in Christ as a means of justification.33 Such multiple motivations for a single exegetical impulse are highly typical of midrash.

For our present purposes, the most revealing exegesis in the passage is the final interpretation of amon as the blueprint, the plan, that God used in creating the universe. Although the Torah is described here as though it existed before the creation of the world, like the Logos, the idea is not necessarily Platonic.34 The Torah is not being defined as the idea whose second-order reflection is the universe; rather, the Torah is conceived as the instrument God used in creating the world, as His blueprint and set of directions, which He looks into in the way an architect looks into a blueprint, or the way the Rabbis themselves looked into the Torah as the blueprint for the existence they constructed for themselves. Torah, then, is not identical with God, its relationship to Him is, one might say, metonymic rather than metaphoric, a matter of extension rather than resemblance. The study of Torah, the activity of midrash, does not therefore constitute an act of directly interpreting God as though the text itself were literally divine. Instead, one could almost call midrash the interpretation of Torah as a figure or trope standing for God.

The concept of Torah in midrash can therefore be characterized best by its figurative status. As in all cases of rhetorical figuration, this status allows the Torah to be both identified and not identified with its presumed object. To begin with the positive side, the near identification of Torah and God provides the Rabbis with the basic axioms of midrashic hermeneutics: first, the belief in the omnисignificance of Scripture, in the meaningfulness of every word, letter, even (according to one famous report) scribal flourish; second, the claim of the essential unity of Scripture as the expression of the single divine will. From the first axiom proceeds the common midrashic technique of atomization, whereby verses and phrases, sometimes even single words, in Scripture are broken up into smaller units, which are then exploited in isolation for hermeneutical significance. From the second axiom derives the equally typical midrashic habit of viewing the Bible atemporally, of explaining Scripture through Scripture, and of connecting the most disparate and seemingly unrelated verses in order to create new and ever-reaching nexuses of meaning; in short, intertextuality that is elevated in midrash to the level of a virtual exegetical principle.

Both hermeneutical axioms and their resulting practices stem from the association of Torah with its author—or, as in the midrash cited earlier, of the blueprint with the architect, who presumably drew the blueprint to help him in his job. To know Torah, to read and follow the divine blueprint, is, in this sense, a way to come to know the mind of the divine architect, and ultimately, to imitate Him and construct a human existence modeled after God's creation of the world. From this perspective it is possible to understand why midrash is not merely an act of literary interpretation but a path toward holiness. "If you want to come to know the One who spoke and created the world, study [midrash] aggadah," the Rabbis said, "and you will come to know Him who by His word created the world." As Judah Goldin has recently argued, this seemingly theological axiom may actually be a polemical statement asserting that one can serve God through the study of aggadah and through midrash as effectively as by the practice of halakah.35

The other side of the equation between God and Torah, however, is the refusal of midrash to make the identification of Torah and God literal. This side can easily be seen if one compares the midrashic position with mystical, quasi-Gnostic conceptions of Torah as the name of God and of Scriptural exegesis as the unfolding of the essence of that name. The full identification of Torah with God becomes truly explicit only in the kabbalistic speculation of the later Middle Ages, in formulations that openly connect the infinity of God's being with the infinity of meanings to be found in Torah, and in Scriptural exegesis that "decodes the Bible as a mystical biography of the infra-divine infinite processes and the regulations which influence the function of those processes."36 Yet even in the Rabbinic period, there are testimonies in contemporary mystical/Gnostic documents that literally identify God and Torah: one hymn refers to the text of the Torah as being inscribed upon
God's "limbs," his "arms" and "legs." Other texts, using similarly anthropomorphic terms, speak of Scriptural interpretation as literal description of God's body. This notion of Torah is clearly different from the one underlying midrash; indeed, midrash might even be said to have denied this equation. A midrashic exegesis always returns to the text, not to God.

Just as midrash rejects the mystical idea of the literal infinity of meanings in the Torah (and its corollary, the infinity of God), so, too, does midrash avoid the twin conceptions of the interpreter as a transported, divinely inspired being and of the act of interpretation as a magical, prophetic activity occurring within states of ecstasy, through paranormal spiritual experiences—angelic revelations, ecstatic encounters, onrushing messages, and so on. For the mystical conception of interpretation, such experiences are virtually a "condition for the attainment of the sublime secrets of Torah." As the distance between God and Torah disappears, the distinction between God and man becomes equally blurred, so that the mystical act of sacred interpretation itself becomes an occasion for non-negative description of supernatural phenomena attending sages engaged in Scriptural interpretation are not entirely lacking in Rabbinic literature. But the act of interpretation in midrash is itself almost completely severed from any connection with prophecy or analogous types of revelatory experience. One of the most famous stories in all Rabbinic literature relates how one sage, Rabbi Eilezer ben Hyrkanus, disputed with the entire academy of sages at Yavneh over a matter concerning the laws of purity. Refusing to concede his position, Rabbi Eilezer called upon heaven to come to his aid and testify on his behalf. Immediately, the story relates, Rabbi Eilezer successfully ordered a carob tree to uproot itself and fly a hundred feet (according to one, four hundred feet); then, for a nearby stream to flow backward, finally, for a divine oracle to confirm his position. Nevertheless, the sages refused to accept the divine testimony, citing as proof of their own position—as decided by majority rule—the Deuteronomic verse, "It is not in heaven" (Deut. 3:12), which Rabbi Yermiyah interpreted as follows: "Since the Torah has already been given from Mount Sinai, we do not pay attention to heavenly voices, for you have already written at Mount Sinai, after the majority incline" (Exod. 23:2)." Rabbi Yermiyah effectively invokes Scripture against God. The story concludes by relating how God, listening to heaven in this Rabbinic debate, laughed and said, "My children have defeated me, my children have defeated me." 

The dissociation of interpretation from prophecy also distinguishes midrashic exegesis from other types of Scriptural exegesis more contemporary with the Rabbis. As Joseph Blenkinsopp has shown, the transition from prophecy to interpretation as a source of religious authority was initially achieved by attributing prophetic inspiration to interpretation. This move can be witnessed as early as in the book of Daniel, but it is far more evident in the most famous example of biblical exegesis found at Qumran, the Pesher Commentary on Habakkuk.

This commentary not only attributes prophetic stature to its interpreter-author, possibly the Teacher of Righteousness himself, it even claims, as part of its exegesis of Habakkuk, that the prophet Habakkuk wrote down the prophecies God had revealed to him without knowing the meaning of what he wrote. Indeed, God is said to have concealed that meaning until the Teacher of Righteousness was born and "God made known [to him] all the mysteries of the words of His servants the Prophets." This last claim is itself derived from a phrase in Habakkuk, "that he who reads may read it speedily" (Hab. 2:2). According to the pesher interpretation of this phrase, God in effect foresees that the prophet-interpreter will supersede the prophet-writer in prophetic power and will usurp his position.

Viewed against the backdrop of Qumranic exegesis, it is possible to see in midrash an attempt on the part of the Rabbis to divest exegesis of both such prophetic pretensions (and their potential subversion of Scripture's unique status) and the more publicly dangerous charge of apocalyptic and sectarian politics. To be sure, this act of repudiation—or neutralization, if you wish—also expressed an agenda of its own. The destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. and the catastrophes that followed in subsequent centuries bred in the Rabbis a certain despair with history, as it did in many of their contemporaries, but that despair did not lead them into either apocalyptic fantasy or Gnostic dualism. Rather, the estrangement that the Rabbis felt had developed between God and the world, the disparity they saw between the divine promise and its fulfillment in human reality, appeared to have turned their energies inward, into the construction of paradigms of holiness within their self-enclosed society. Seemingly oblivious to the larger historical arena in which they lived, yet wary as well of their own desire for messianically inspired political activism, they instead directed their imaginations toward the text of the Torah and its interpretation.

The Rabbis' conception of Torah as a figurative trope for God—treating God and Torah simultaneously as identical and not identical—expresses both their sense of alienation and their attempt to overcome that alienation intellectually. Following the destruction of the Temple, the text of the Torah became for the Rabbis the primary sign of the continued existence of the covenantal relationship between God and Israel, and the activity of Torah study—midrash—thus became the foremost medium for preserving and pursuing that relationship. Understood this way, the object of midrash was not so much to find the meaning of Scripture as it was literally to engage its text. Midrash became a kind of conversation the Rabbis invented in order to enable God to speak to them from between the lines of Scripture, in the textual fissures and discontinuities that exegesis discovers. The multiplication of interpretations in midrash was one way, as it were, to prolong that conversation.

To some extent, Rabbinic exegesis, like the interpretive ideologies of Western culture, is motivated by an anxiety about the loss of meaning or presence
(an anxiety that has led Western thinkers to substitute for genuine presence a
metaphysics of presence or, as Derrida has argued, a covert theology)—hence the
ubiquitous concern of midrash to prove the relevance of Torah to every conceivable
circumstance, to make it embrace every aspect of life. But more than fearing that
the divine guarantee behind Scripture’s meaning may have been lost, the Rabbis
were haunted by the worry, the deeper fear, that their tradition of interpretation,
entire body of practice and exegesis expressed in the oral Torah, may not have
represented the authoritative, the one and only divinely sanctioned heritage of the
biblical revelation.

Part of this anxiety derived from the Rabbis’ historical experience. Palestinian
Judaism in late antiquity consisted of a spectrum of competing religious sects—
among them the Qumran sects, the Jewish Christians, the Rabbis themselves (or
their predecessors, like the Pharisees)—each of which claimed to be the sole and
authentic heir of the biblical tradition. Among these groups, the Rabbis were
not always the most obviously successful (nor the least), but the destruction of
the Temple in 70 C.E. was exploited by some of their competitors (Christians,
for example) to prove that God had rejected the Jews and chosen others, like
themselves, as the true Israel. Yet even without such specific provocations, the
Rabbis’ anxiety over their election was in some sense inevitable. It was bound
to have arisen since, after all, Rabbinic Judaism, like other Jewish sects of the
period, was an extension of biblical religion, not identical with it, and it was not
the only such adumbration of that heritage or the only interpretation of the Bible’s
contemporary relevance.

The response the Rabbis made to these doubts about their election, about the
authority of their tradition, was to adopt an interpretive posture that represents
the very opposite of Harold Bloom’s idea of the anxiety of influence. The Rabbis
consciously—happily, we might say—assume the stance of belatedness. Precisely
what they seek to prove is that all the innovations and inventions of their tradition
can already be found in the text of the Bible, that nothing they say is original, hence
the essential preoccupation of midrash with finding in the biblical text a source for
every law and belief in Rabbinic tradition, no matter how contrived the connection
may be. Thus, too, the Rabbis’ overriding concern with confirming the chain of
tradition, a chain they claim began with God’s revelation at Sinai and proceeded,
oral link by link, from Moses and the prophets down through the generations to
Ezra and finally to the sages themselves. And finally, this same anxiety is doubtless
the source for the virtual obsession in Rabbinic discourse with attribution, with
naming authors and tradens and tracing the history of traditions. A student who
neglects to name the author of a tradition will forget all his learning one tradition
reports by way of warning.43 Given all the special exigencies of their historical
situation, it is not difficult to understand the essential conservatism of the Rabbis,
their upholding of tradition and refusal of prophecy as well as anything else that
might be construed as usurpation of Scripture’s unique status.

Such contented belatedness was one way the Rabbis expressed their anxiety
over the claim to being the sole authentic heirs of the biblical tradition. Another
response, perhaps more pertinent to their interpretive activities, can be seen in
their treatment of multiple interpretations. The question asked by Rabbi Eleazar’s
student—“How can I study Torah”5—may also be understood as an expression
of anxiety. If the Rabbis disagree about every point of the law, if they cannot
even agree among themselves about its meaning, then how can they claim to be
its genuine interpreters, the owners of its truth? One response is given by Rabbi
Eleazar: even in the case of conflicts, the opinions of both sages—the one who
permits and the one who forbids—are the words of the living God.

From this perspective, the citation of multiple interpretations in midrash is an
attempt to represent in textual terms an idealized academy of Rabbinic tradition
where all the opinions of the sages are recorded equally as part of a single divine
conversation. Opinions that in human discourse may appear contradictory or
mutually exclusive are raised to the state of paradox once traced to their common
source in the speech of the divine author.

This representation, however, is a literary artifact. Like much of Rabbinic
discourse, it attempts to capture or to imitate in writing the oral exchanges that
took place between sages both in formal debates in the academy and on less formal
circumstances elsewhere. The phenomenon we witness in multiple interpretation, in
other words, is in actuality a literary impression, something of an illusion created
by the redaction of Rabbinic literature, the result of a common choice made by its
anonymous editors to preserve minority as well as majority opinions, the varieties
of traditions rather than single versions. In making this choice, the Rabbinic editors
did not act without precedent; indeed, they followed in a venerable tradition of
early Jewish literature that included such other sacred “compromise texts” as the
Pentateuch, in which separate documentary sources are combined into a single
composition as though their agendas and ideologies were compatible (which they
eventually were made out to be), or the New Testament, in which the four Gospels,
each with a different Christology, stand side by side.44 The difference between
these earlier texts and the Rabbinic midrashim is simply that in the latter editorial
policy was elevated to the order of exegetical ideology, that is, polysemy functions
as a trait of sacred Scripture. Here, for the first time, editorial pluralism has become
a condition of meaning.

Polysemy in midrash, then, is to be understood as a claim to textual stability
rather than its opposite, an indeterminate state of endlessly deferred meanings
and unresolved conflicts. In fact, midrashic polysemy suggests more than just
textual stability; it points to a fantasy of social stability, of human community in
Judaism actually was can be gauged by the fact that both Caml1el and his son Simon were arrogant and authoritarian, and their behavior exacerbated already tense situations. Precisely how strife-ridden the internal political situation of Rabbinic Judaism was never entirely eradicated. The patriarchs themselves at times faced attempts by other sages to depose them from their hereditary offices. The confrontation between Caml1el and Joshua probably took place around the years 100–110 C.E. Sometime after Caml1el was reinstated as patriarch, the event narrated in the following passage in Hagigah (B Hagigah 3a–b) is supposed to have taken place:

Once Rabbi Yohanan ben Beroka and Rabbi Eleazar Hisma went to pay their respects to Rabbi Joshua [ben Hananiah] at Pekiin. [Rabbi Joshua] asked them: What new teaching was there at the house of study today? They replied: We are your disciples, and we drink your waters. He said to them: Even so, it is impossible for a study session to pass without some new teaching. Whose Sabbath was it? [They answered:] It was the Sabbath of Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah. [He asked:] So what was the theme of his sermon today? They responded: The biblical section that begins, “Assemble the people, the men and the women and the children.” If the men came to learn and the women came to listen, why did children have to come? In order to reward those that brought them. [Rabbi Joshua] said to them: That was a precious gem you held in your hands, and you wished to deprive me of it! [His students continued: Rabbi Eleazar] also expounded: “You have affirmed this day that the Lord is your God, and the Lord has affirmed this day that you are His treasured people” (Deut. 26:17–18). The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel: You have made me a unique object of your love in the world, and I shall make you a unique object of My love in the world. You have made me a unique object of your love, as it is written, “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One” (Deut. 6:4). And I will make you a unique object of My love, as it is said, “And who is like Your people Israel, a unique nation on earth . . . ?” (1 Chron. 17:21).

[At this point the sermon on Eccles. 12:11, quoted earlier, is cited.]

[Rabbi Joshua then] said to [his two disciples]: The generation in which Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah lives is not an orphan.

Rabbis Yohanan ben Beroka and Eleazar Hisma were two disciples of Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah. On their way home from the central academy at Yavneh, they stopped at Pekiin to pay respects to their teacher, who was living, it seems from
the narrative, in some isolation from the other sages. When he asked his students what they had learned in the main academy, they replied, "We are your disciples, and we drink your waters." This answer can be read at least two ways. According to traditional commentators, the disciples' response expresses their humility in their teacher's presence. We are your students, they tell him. You teach us; we do not presume to instruct you. The same statement, however, can be understood not as showing the students' dutiful respect to their teacher but as party loyalty. We are your students, they tell Joshua, and we do not study with other teachers—a sentiment that would reflect the factionalism of the Yavneh generation. If that is the meaning of their statement, Rabbi Joshua's response to them is a rebuke: Still, you must have learned something at the academy. He then asks whose Sabbath it was, and their reply, "the Sabbath of Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah," immediately recalls the controversy over the patriarch Gamliel's authoritarian behavior, his abuse of Rabbi Joshua, our Rabbi Joshua, now living in Pekiin at a distance from the main academy in Yavneh, whose intellectual exchange he clearly seems to miss, at least enough to want to hear from his disciples what his fellow sages are teaching.

Chastened by their teacher's rebuke, Rabbis Yohanan and Eleazar proceed to rehearse for Rabbi Joshua the three homilies they heard at the academy. At the outset it should be stated that the collocation of these separate homilies in a single literary context is almost certainly an invention of the Talmud's editor. It is highly unlikely that Rabbi Eleazar actually delivered all three homilies on a single occasion; moreover, the individual sermons are found separately elsewhere in Rabbinic literature, a fact that probably attests to their original independence from one another. Nonetheless, all three homilies raise issues that are relevant, more or less directly, to the frame story and its background in the conflict between Gamliel and Joshua.

The first of these homilies comments on Deut. 31:10-13, a passage in which Moses commands the priests to read the law before the entire nation on the holiday of Tabernacles every eighth year. The fulfillment of this command was later assumed by the king of Israel, an important fact since the patriarchal family claimed direct descent from the royal House of David. On the one hand, the substance of the homily stresses the unity of the Israelite community and its shared activity of study, thereby recalling the social fantasy that the concept of polysemy implies, as we have seen. On the other hand, it is difficult to read the homily without remembering the story of Eleazar's appointment to the priesthood following Gamliel's deposition, the political conflicts behind that appointment, and all the social ramifications of that incident. For Rabbi Eleazar, on "his" Sabbath, to preach a sermon on a biblical text that itself might serve as an archetype for all subsequent patriarchal sermons might almost be construed as a claim to the patriarchal throne. The entire homily, then, may have a politically incendiary message.

The second small homily, in contrast, speaks of the relationship between God and Israel, the uniqueness of each party in the other's estimation, and, perhaps most important, Israel's difference from all other nations in God's eyes. This homily returns us to the Rabbis' need to affirm their identity as God's elect nation, an affirmation that for the Rabbis was directly connected to the activity of midrash and its ideology of interpretation.

The third homily, as we have seen, presents an idealized picture of interpretive pluralism. Yet the very idealism of that picture, the happy coexistence of opposite sites envisioned within its fantasy, is undercut by the troubling ambiguity of the very conclusion of the passage, that is, Rabbi Joshua's final statement to his disciples. His ostensible praise of his colleague, Joshua's declaration—"The generation in which Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah lives is not an orphan"—appears by virtue of its negative form to suggest the very opposite of what it states: to imply, in other words, that his, Joshua's, generation is indeed orphaned, that it lacks a leader or proper leadership, that it is defenseless as an orphan, equally protectorless, and likely to be oppressed and victimized. That sentiment returns us again to the unhappy factionalism of early Rabbinic Judaism. It also echoes another statement Rabbi Joshua is reputed once to have made, "Woe to the generation of which you are the leader!" This was the rhetorical lament he addressed to Gamliel when the deposed patriarch came to him to apologize.

In its entirety, then, this passage presents two nearly contradictory impressions. The first of these, common to all the homilies but epitomized in the lengthy third homily we analyzed in detail, conveys a nearly utopian vision of Rabbinic society, a fantasy of harmonious opposition where conflict is literally fruitless, and in which the words of Torah grow like plants and lead from death to life even if they are also goads and sharp as nails. In this fantasy, difference exists (as surely as do the differences among men, women, and children), but the resolution of such difference is seen as an essentially benign process. Difference is ultimately overcome and transcended through the shared participation of all Israelites in Torah study, in the relationship of divine election that Israel's occupation in Torah study signifies. In contrast to this portrait of benign conflict resolution, however, the frame for the homilies, the narrative context for their recitation, alludes to a very different evaluation of conflict and its adjudication, even over "matters of Torah." This evaluation sees conflict as a malignant presence and its resolution as the violent exercise of power, as indeed it sometimes was in Rabbinic society.

The events to which the narrative frame alludes, though they may not be entirely factual historically, represent what Edward Said has called the "worldly" aspects of the text, the human and social conditions out of which the homilies in the passage came into being. Yet these aspects, with their unhappy implications about the nature of social reality, tend to undermine the idealized portrait of interpretive pluralism portrayed in the homilies. The homilies, in turn, when viewed from the perspective of the frame, appear almost as a kind of rhetorical denial of historical
reality, a reality that persists in making its presence felt within the text even as it is being denied.

Admittedly, such a reading of the text is nascently deconstructive. Yet it provides us with a peculiarly bound and limited meaning for this text about polysemy: it posits a historical condition and presents the passage as a formation, albeit a negative one, of that condition. What would the Rabbis themselves have made of this reading? It surely would not have been acceptable to them, but not, I would propose, on account of its skepticism, its cynical suspicions about their ideology and about the fantasies that may have motivated that ideology. Rather, I believe that the Rabbis would have acknowledged that the concept of polysemy was a formation or product of something else. They would have located that effective cause not in their historical situation but in the act of Scriptural exegesis itself, that is to say, in the very midrash of Eccles. 12:11 that Rabbi Eleazar presented in his homily. They would have said, in other words, that divine Scripture, if read correctly, dictates its own polysemous reading.

Now this view, the Rabbis’ reading, may itself be contextualized and explained historically: for a theoretical reading of the passage, for understanding the relationship between midrash and theory, it has other implications. The most significant of these is that Scriptural exegesis, midrash, is not identical with literary theory or simply reducible to it. What a theoretical reading of midrash can contribute is precisely an understanding of the difference between midrash and theory, between (for one thing) the role midrash played for the Rabbis, which was to maintain the presence of Scripture (and thereby of God) in their lives, and the function that theory fulfills, which is to strengthen our acts of reading and to deepen (sometimes by undermining) our understanding of them. The difference separating these conceptions is at least one sign of the distance that interpretation has traveled in the course of history.

Chapter 2

Forms of Midrash I:
Parables of Interpretation

For many students of literature, the idea of midrash may most immediately suggest the ways in which one text and its meaning are to be found in another, that is, the very exegetical features buried within works of fiction and poetry. In the study of midrash itself, however, the nature of its “literariness” becomes an issue not at the point where literature becomes exegesis but where exegesis turns into literature, where it comes to possess its own language and voice. In the previous chapter, I discussed the problematic connection between the hermeneutics of midrash and literary theory. In this chapter and in chapter 3, I wish to discuss midrash as literary discourse in its own right.

As we shall see, the literary forms of midrash are not irrelevant to its hermeneutics. Yet to understand these forms, the first duty of a literary approach to midrash, as paradoxical as it may seem, must be to suspend temporarily our more immediate concerns with “literature”—that is, our preconceptions as to what constitutes literature and what we are accustomed to consider its formal properties—and to go over, as it were, to the other side in order to describe the specific language of midrash and the special conditions that created its singular literary forms and modes of expression. This is necessary whether those forms and modes are the recognizable techniques of narrative or whether they constitute the more unusual exegetical vehicles that are often far more typical of midrashic discourse.

In this chapter, I want to discuss perhaps the most clearly definable form of narrative in midrash, the parable or mashal. Yet as soon as the student of midrash embarks upon the project of defining a literary form in midrash, he or she encounters what is probably the most frustrating feature of Rabbinic literature in general, namely, its reticence—how little it reveals of the story of its own making, about the situations and circumstances in which its texts originated, let alone about its more “theoretical” underpinnings. A partial exception to this general rule may be the following rather amusing narrative from Vayikra Rabbah:

Shimeon, the son of Rabbi [Judah], prepared a [wedding] banquet for his son. He went and invited all the sages, but he forgot to invite Bar Kappara.