realities, 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 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: but 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.
Bar Kappara went and wrote on the door of Rabbi Shimeon's house: After rejoicing is death. So what value is there to rejoicing? Rabbi Shimeon asked. Who did this to me? Is there anyone we did not invite?

Someone said Bar Kappara. You forgot to invite him. Rabbi Shimeon remarked. To invite [Bar Kappara] now by himself would be unseemly.

So Rabbi Shimeon went and made a second banquet, and he invited all the sages, and he also invited Bar Kappara. But at every course that was brought in to the guests, Bar Kappara recited three hundred fox fables. The guests did not even taste the dishes before they grew cold, and the dishes were removed from the table just as they had been brought in. Rabbi Shimeon asked his servant: Why are all the dishes being returned untouched?

[The servant] replied. Because there is an old man sitting there, and at every course he tells fables until the dishes grow cold, and no one eats them.

Rabbi Shimeon went up to Bar Kappara and said: What have I done to make you ruin my banquet?

Bar Kappara responded: Do I need your banquet? Did not Solomon say, "What real value is there for a man in all the gains he makes beneath the sun?" (Eccles. 1:3) And what is written after that verse? "One generation goes, another comes, but the earth remains the same forever." (Eccles. 1:4)

Unhappily, this passage tells us nothing about the three hundred fox fables—mashal or meshalim—that Bar Kappara recited over every course at Rabbi Shimeon's banquet. In fact, the passage doesn't bother to record even a single mashal, possibly because the fables, entertaining as they must have been, were not considered sufficiently "serious" to be preserved in writing. Even so, the passage is revealing, if only for what it suggests about the nature of the mashal as a literary form and its function as an allusive narrative with an unspoken message. In Bar Kappara's case, the very act of reciting the mashal served an ulterior purpose. It offered him a clever way of revenge against his host for the insult he felt he had earlier suffered.

Admittedly, revenge is an unusual motive for parable-making. Elsewhere in Rabbinic literature, other motives, purposes, and occasions for the mashal are depicted. Some sages are reported to have used the mashal as an oblique means of expressing political opinions that were too dangerous to be stated openly. Other sages are said to have employed the literary form as an effective weapon for responding to polemical attacks by outsiders (very much the way Jesus is portrayed in the Gospels as fashioning parables to argue with the Jewish leaders who oppose him). Still other sages used the parable as a taciturn instrument for smoothing over socially awkward or embarrassing situations as well as for praising the dead, either in eulogies or in the course of consoling grieving relatives. Several sources preserve mashalim of this type. One text relates how Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakka recited two meshalim about himself even as he lay in bed dying.

The most frequent occasion for use of the mashal, however, was the sermon in the synagogue or the lecture in the Rabbinic academy. Surprisingly, there exist no literary descriptions of mashalim delivered in these institutional contexts. Still, it seems highly probable that most of the approximately one thousand meshalim recorded in Rabbinic literature were at least intended to be used in these institutions as material for sermons or lessons. It is therefore only appropriate that the most common literary context in which mashalim are preserved in Rabbinic literature is that of midrash. It was midrash that determined the conventional two-part structure of the mashal, consisting of a narrative (the mashal proper) and a nashal, the so-called explanation or (as I prefer to call it) application of the narrative. And it was midrash, too, that gave the Rabbinic mashal its explicit raison d'être, which was to be an exegetical tool, a device for interpreting Scripture and for arriving at its meaning.

The Rabbis themselves believed that the mashal was invented (according to one tradition, by King Solomon) in order to reveal the secrets of Torah. To make this very point, the Rabbis recited a mashal about the mashal:

It is like a king who lost a gold piece in his house, or a valuable gem. Does he not find it by means of a penny candle?

Likewise: Let not the mashal seem trivial in your eyes, for by means of the mashal a man is able to understand the words of Torah.

What is trivial about the mashal is its fictionality, a fictionality legitimated or "saved," as it were, by the exegetical instrumentality of the mashal. Now we need not accept the Rabbis' estimation of the mashal's value (worth no more than a penny candle) in order to appreciate their view that the mashal is a didactic literary form, a story with a message. But the real object of that message is not exegesis per se, it is an ideology, a worldview—specifically, the ideology of Rabbinic Judaism. The mashal is an ideological narrative, and the Rabbis used it, as they used Scriptural exegesis, to impress upon their audience the validity and authority of their view of the world. And the reason why Scriptural exegesis, midrash, was so effective a tool for ideological communication of this kind was because the Rabbis were fully persuaded that the Torah expressed their vision of Judaism as God's will for the world.

Form, as we know, follows function. And we have just seen the many functions that the mashal served for the Rabbis. But form is not identical with function,
it was the form of the mashal that proved so attractive to the Rabbis. What was that form? How did it arise? How could it be so adaptable, so able to serve the Rabbis in so many different contexts and on so many occasions?

We can begin to answer these questions by saying that there is no single explanation or model that will explain comprehensively the traits of all meshalim in Rabbinic literature (let alone all parables in world literature). In fact, there are at least three separate models for conceptualizing the mashal, and these three models lie along a kind of spectrum of parabolic possibilities. Two of the three form the extremities of the spectrum: at one end, the parable as an illustrative or demonstrational narrative; at the other, as a mode of secret or concealing speech. Between these two poles lies a third model, the mashal as a rhetorical narrative. In my view, most Rabbinic meshalim may be grouped under this last model, that is, somewhere between the two extreme poles of open illustration and secret speech. Nonetheless, certain Rabbinic meshalim are closer in character to one of the other two models, and in the course of the mashal's history in Hebrew literature, from the Bible until Agnon (nearly), the parable has been used at different times in conformity with all three models. Each one, accordingly, warrants a brief description before we proceed to our main subject, the Rabbinic mashal.

The Mashal as Illustration

In this view, the mashal is a medium for illustrating abstract ideas or beliefs through narrative examples that are concrete, familiar, and thus (this is the primary assumption behind this model) more easily comprehended by an audience that is believed to be inherently incapable of grasping such abstractions on its own and therefore requires the "help" of the parable. In this conceptualization, highly influential in New Testament parable scholarship since the nineteenth century, the mashal is a kind of simile, an explicit figure for likeness and resemblance.

The application of this model to the Rabbinic mashal is a complicated matter. There are certainly many instances in Talmudic and midrashic texts where the mashal is used as an illustration. In Bereshit Rabbah 1:15, two oft-quoted meshalim, attributed to the Houses of Hillel and Shammai, appear as responses to the question of what was created first in the universe—the heavens (according to the House of Shammai) or the earth (according to the House of Hillel).

According to the House of Shammai, it is like a king who built a throne for himself, and then made a footstool to go with it, as it is written, "... The heaven is My throne and the earth is My footstool" (Isa. 66:1).

According to the House of Hillel, it is like a king who built a palace, after he built the ground floor, he built the upper stories, as it is written, "... on the day when the Lord made earth and heaven" (Gen. 2:4).

As illustrations, these two examples seem at first glance to be wholly straightforward. Yet they do considerably more than merely illustrate the two houses' respective views of the order of creation. Each mashal's narrative also predicates a different conception of the nature of the created universe and of God's relationship to it. According to one house, the earth is God's footstool, according to the other, it is His palace.

In literature from the Rabbinic period, one can find other parables of this illustrational kind. But it is not until post-Rabbinic, early medieval Jewish times that the use of the mashal as an illustration becomes the prevalent form. It occurs initially in the ninth-century composition Tanma de-Be-Elyahu, and becomes even more prevalent in subsequent philosophical works by such authors as Maimonides. For the vast majority of meshalim in Rabbinic literature, however, the illustrational model does not offer an adequate description. Most midrashic meshalim are far less illustrative than the examples above. Even more crucially, the narratives of most mashalim, which this model asserts are supposed to facilitate and assist their audience in understanding the mashal's lesson or its underlying meaning, are actually far more enigmatic and difficult to understand than the nimshalim themselves. In these parables, what requires elucidation is the narrative, not the nimshal or its lesson. Considered as illustrations, these meshalim are horrible failures.

The Mashal as Secret Speech

This model, the near opposite of the preceding one, conceives of the mashal as a deliberately occluding and concealing mode of language. As such, it resembles the view that identifies the mashal with allegory (which is, indeed, what the word meshal comes to mean as a technical term in medieval Hebrew). The "allegorical" view itself is first expressed in the Gospels, in the famous theory of parabolic discourse attributed to Jesus (Mark 4:11-12 and parallels), while among modern scholars it has been most elegantly championed by Frank Kermode, who sees all narrative as enigmatic and excluding, having the "property of banishing interpreters from its secret places." For Kermode, the parable is merely a purer, more intense or pristine instance of this general characteristic of narrative.

According to this model, the mashal is an intrinsically esoteric form. It is an interpretive shield guarding a secret meaning, separating "insiders" from "outsiders" and restricting access to comprehension to a select, chosen few. In a corollary often associated with this model of the mashal, the literary form is typically used in politically or religiously oppressive situations in order to express controversial or dangerous beliefs that one could not articulate openly, either for political or doctrinal reasons.

The Rabbis themselves would probably have appreciated this conception of the mashal. For example, they interpret Yohanan's seditious parable in Judges 9:7-20
express it, and impossible to explain." This statement prefaces a mashal that in secret uses of the parable. The best example of these is the statement in Bereshit Rabbah 22:19, attributed to Rabbi Shimeon ben Yohai: "It is difficult really to express it, and impossible to explain." This statement prefaces a mashal that in effect condemns God for letting Cain kill Abel. But this mashal and the few others like it are truly exceptions in Rabbinic literature. As a mode of secretive, exclusive discourse, the mashal does not emerge in its full shape until the beginning of kabbalistic literature in the early Middle Ages, first in the many enigmatic meshalim preserved in Sefer HaBabli and later in the elegant parables found in the Zohar. Within Rabbinic tradition, the communicational model for the mashal is exoteric, not esoteric. Even where a mashal's message is ambiguous or especially subtle and difficult to paraphrase, that message can be "interpreted out" of the mashal by any minimally competent reader.

The Mashal as Rhetorical Narrative

This model steers a course between the two poles represented in the preceding models. In my view, it is the model that accounts for most meshalim in Rabbinic literature. Here the mashal is an allusive narrative told for an ulterior purpose: it draws a series of parallels between a fictional story and the actual, "real-life" situation to which the mashal is directed. Rather than make those parallels explicit, however, the mashal leaves them to its audience to figure out. This is the inherently hermeneutic character of the form, and no doubt a major reason why the mashal was so popular among the Rabbis. Neither a secret tale with a hidden meaning nor a transparent story with a clear-cut moral, the mashal is a narrative that actively elicits from its audience the application of its message—or what we would call its interpretation.

Consider the following mashal from Vayikra Rabbah 2:4, whose author, Rabbi Berechiah, was a fourth-century Palestinian sage.

Rabbi Berechiah said: It is like an elder who had a robe [ma'afaret]. He commanded his disciple, saying: Fold it and iron it and be very careful.

The disciple asked: My master, O elder! Of all the robes you own, why do you command me only about this one?

The elder replied: Because that robe is the one I wore the day I was appointed an elder!

Likewise: Moses said before the Holy One: Master of the Universe! Of all seventy self-ruling nations that you have in the world, you command me only regarding Israel!

He replied: For they accepted my sovereignty at Mount Sinai and declared, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do and we will obey" (Exod. 24:7).

The exegetical occasion for this mashal, its prooftext, is Exod. 24:7, which here is understood to be a literal acknowledgment on the part of the people of Israel of kabalat ol malkhut shamayim, the acceptance of God's sovereignty. The mashal's principal message, however, is not praise of God but of Israel—and praise is expressed in terms of Israel's uniqueness in God's eyes. Yet this unique status derives, in turn, from the praise, the doxa, the special glory, that Israel paid to God—a theme that is raised by the central image in the mashal's narrative, the image of the robe. This image, as Saul Lieberman has pointed out, refers to the ma'afaret, the special ceremonial robe of office that an elder sage assumed upon appointment. As it is employed in the mashal, the image is also a rather bold one, for it suggests that God, too, was not "appointed" to his office until the children of Israel elected Him at Mount Sinai—a fairly radical theological idea that appears elsewhere in Rabbinic literature. This idea only intensifies the high praise paid to Israel.

The same message of praise informs the exegesis of Exod. 24:7, the mashal's prooftext, which culminates the nimshal or application of the narrative (the second part of the normative literary form, which begins, in the example above, with the word "likewise"). The full "parabolic" meaning of that exegesis might be paraphrased as follows: Even though the Jews, unlike the seventy Gentile nations, do not have an independent or self-ruling political state of their own (a fact that doubtless emphasized a pointed and sad truth for Jews living in Palestine in the fourth century), they are still dearer to God than all the Gentile nations because Israel alone accepted God's sovereignty, His law, at Sinai.

Praise of Israel is therefore achieved indirectly here through a comparison with the other nations. To that extent, this mashal involves a degree of polemic, and if we had to describe its message or theme in a single phrase, we could call it polemicized praise. Most meshalim in Rabbinic literature have a comparable rhetorical function. They express thematic messages, but those messages tend to be phrased in terms of either praise or blame, or a variant of the two: approbation or disapproval, appreciation or disappointment, pleasure or pain. While praise and blame are not in themselves the mashal's meaning, they are its structures of signification, the critical terms in its rhetorical vocabulary. Through praise and blame, the mashal communicates its thematic and ideological messages. These messages, though in theory numberless, can in practice be specified rather easily: apologetics; polemics; consolation (often formulated as eulogy, praise of the dead); complaint (blame directed against the mashal's addressee, a character usually figuring in the mashal's own narrative, for the unfairness of his behavior); regret (in which the mashal's protagonist reconsiders his or her act of praise or blame);
warning (in which the mashal anticipates, as it were, its act of blame or praise), and a few others. 27

In the remainder of this chapter, I wish to analyze in detail one mashal that, as we shall see, explicitly communicates one message of praise and simultaneously hints at a second message closer to blame. The mashal is found in Ekhah Rabbah, the classical midrash on the book of Lamentations, as well as in several other sources. Its author, Rabbi Abba bar Kahana, was another fourth-century Palestinian sage. I will first quote the mashal’s narrative, its mashal proper. 28

Rabbi Abba bar Kahana said: It is like a king who married a woman and wrote her a large dowry [ketubah]. He wrote to her: So many bridal chambers I make for you, so much jewelry I make for you, so much gold and silver I give you. Then he left her for many years and journeyed to the provinces. Her neighbors used to taunt her and say: Hasn’t your husband abandoned you? Go! Marry another man.

She would weep and sigh, and afterward, she would enter her bridal chamber and read her marriage settlement and console herself. Many years and days later the king returned. He said to her: I am amazed that you have waited for me all these years.

She replied: My master, O king! If not for the large dowry you wrote me, my neighbors would have misled me astray long ago.

The mashal’s symbolism is nearly all conventional and does not require elaborate explanation: the king represents God, his consort the people of Israel, the dowry or ketubah the Torah. 29 Even so, it is important that we not miss the sometimes remarkable use to which these symbols, despite their conventionality, are put in the mashal. Consider the helpless consort, a stock figure in some respects but a very unusual character in others. As Kathryn Hellestein has reminded me, how many other texts in Rabbinic literature—or in ancient literature in general—depict a woman who literally survives through reading, or who reads to survive? Or consider the taunts of the neighbors, words that at first glance might appear to be the typical provocations that wicked neighbors would be expected to use in order to arouse the insecurities and fears of a lonely, vulnerable woman. But, in fact, this motif may be the mashal’s most historically grounded detail. According to Roman law, marriage must be by consent, matrimonial affectio, namely, “the intention to be in the married state.” In regard to such intention, the second-century jurist Ulpian specifically discusses cases where husband and wife have lived apart for a long time—exactly as in our mashal—and states that if each one has honored the marriage, they are still married: “for it is not cohabitation which makes a marriage but matrimonial affectio.” 30 The neighbors in our mashal, however, may be said to raise precisely the opposite possibility: since the king disappeared so suddenly, perhaps he has abandoned his wife and has not been faithful to her. If so, she, the consort, is indeed no longer bound to him in marriage. According to the law, she is actually free to marry another man, as the neighbors encourage her to do. She, of course, refuses this “interpretation” of her husband’s absence. Nonetheless, in the mashal’s own historical context within the Greco-Roman world, the neighbors’ “interpretation” may have been the more plausible one: it was certainly not completely improbable or purely malicious.

Such historically grounded detail is crucial for understanding the mashal’s rhetoric. The rhetorical mode of this mashal is clearly praise. In fact, it is doubled praise. At first, the king praises his wife for remaining faithful to him during the long period of his absence, in response, the consort offers her own praise of the ketubah, which, she says, gave her the strength to await her husband’s return despite her unhappy, isolated situation. That situation is elaborated more fully in the mashal:

Likewise: The nations of the world taunt Israel and say to them: Your God does not want you. He has left you. He has removed His presence from you. Come with us. We will appoint you to be generals, governors, and officers.

And the people of Israel enter their synagogues and houses of study, and there they read in the Torah, “I will look with favor upon you and make you fertile. . . . I will establish My abode in your midst, and I will not spurn you” (Lev. 26:9, 11), and they console themselves.

In the future, when the redemption comes, the Holy One, blessed be He, says to Israel: My children! I am amazed at how you have waited for Me all these years.

And they say to Him, Master of the Universe! Were it not for the Torah you gave us, in which we read when we entered our synagogues and houses of study, “I will look with favor upon you . . . and I will not spurn you,” the nations of the world would have led us astray long ago.

That is what is written, “Were not your teaching my delight, I would have perished in my affliction” (Ps. 119:92). Therefore it says, “This [201] I call to mind: therefore I have hope” (Lam. 3:21).

Our analysis of the mashal will begin with its conclusion, the exegesis of Lam. 3:21. In its Scriptural context, this verse is spoken by the gever, the unnamed male who is both the protagonist of the chapter and its speaker. In the preceding twenty verses, the gever has despairingly described how he has been cruelly hunted down and tortured by an all-powerful antagonist, whom we know to be God but whom the gever cannot bring himself to name. In verse 21, however, that of the mashal,
forms since.7, and from that moment on he begins to recover his confidence and regain hope.

Now in Lamentations itself, "this"—what the gever recalls—is a series of discursive propositions that are spelled out in the subsequent verses. These propositions all concern God's nature—His essential goodness, how His mercies are never spent, how ample is His grace, how good He is to those who trust in Him, and so on. In the mashal, however, the word zot, "this," is interpreted so as to refer not to God but to Torah—specifically to the Torah's promises of redemption, as symbolized in the narrative by the image of the ketubah and its promised bridal gifts. To be sure, this interpretation recalls the famous midrash on Deut. 4:44, vezi hatorah, "and this is the Torah," which is explicitly quoted in some of the parallel versions of our mashal.51 Yet it is hard to think of another interpretation that could be more revealing of Rabbinic ideology than this one, with its shifting of meaning from God to the Torah as the referent for the demonstrative zot. As Alan Mintz has noted, Lam. 3:21 is the pivotal verse in the chapter, the precise moment when the gever turns from despair to faith.32 At precisely this moment, Rabbi Abba's interpretation, with its substitution of Torah for God, virtually sums up the achievement of Rabbinic Judaism in instituting Torah study as the practical and theoretical foundation for Israel's spiritual sustenance in the time of exile, as the replacement for the lost Temple cult, and as the medium of access to the divine will in the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple.

The exegesis of zot in Lam. 3:21 is only one of several exegetical acts in the mashal. In fact, this mashal in praise of Torah and its study—in praise of midrash, in other words—is fittingly packed with midrash and with the products of midrash, including references to other midrashim and allusions to extrabiblical aggadot. For example, the taunting words that the nations of the world address to Israel in the nimshal allude to the famous midrash on Song of Songs 5:9-6:3, found both in the Mekhilta (Shirah 3, where it is attributed to Rabbi Akiba) and in Siyy aggregate 343. Similarly, the verses from Leviticus (Lev. 26:9, 11) cited in the nimshal have a lengthy history of interpretation, which can be traced all the way back to the Tannaitic collection Sfira (Bechekatow 1:2, 1:3, 3:3), where the Rabban interpreted the verses eschatologically, as blessings to be fulfilled only at the time of the final redemption. Since these verses are invoked in the nimshal to comfort the people of Israel, we can assume that Rabbi Abba also intended his audience to understand them as referring to the future redemption (otherwise the disparity between the dire reality and the promises of the verse would be anything but comforting). As they are cited in the nimshal, then, these verses are quoted in their already interpreted sense.

Moreover, the mashal's central image, the ketubah, may itself be an exegetical creation. It is possible that the image derives from a pun on the Hebrew word

"Pharisees. I will make you fruitful," in Lev. 26:9, and the Aramaic pasha, borrowed from the Greek phrase a marriage settlement.53 This punning etymology would provide a reason why these particular verses from Leviticus were chosen for the nimshal, and it would explain why the ketubah is so prominent an image in the mashal. Thus the mashal may be said to contain within its narrative the key to its own beginnings as a midrashic act.

Exegesis, though, is not the final intention or whole purpose of the mashal. If the verses from Leviticus are to be read eschatologically, as I have suggested, then the narrative in its entirety takes on a new meaning. When the king returns to his wife after his lengthy absence, he may be said, in narrative terms, to fulfill and realize the promises of Scripture. In other words, the mashal's narrative can be seen as dramatizing the coming redemption before its audience's eyes, the narrative reenacts the Scriptural promises. The consolation the consort makes in the mashal is thus guaranteed to the audience when she has done nothing to deserve it.

These questions raise issues that are both theological and historical, and that could be answered accordingly. For our present purposes, however, it will be more appropriate to frame them in narratological terms. We might ask further: Why does the king suddenly decide to journey to the foreign provinces? Does it enter the king's mind that in his absence the wicked neighbors will torment his wife and test her? Are the lavish promises he makes in the ketubah intended in advance to console her while he is gone? Are his promises sincere? If they are, then why is he so astonished at her faithfulness? Conversely, if he does not expect the ketubah to console his bereft wife, then is there any logical reason for her to remain faithful? Or are his promises disingenuous? Is the king's unexplained absence truly unjustified? Is he perhaps guilty of gratuitous cruelty toward his hapless wife? Is he actually responsible in his own person for the suffering his abandoned wife undergoes in his absence? And why does he finally decide to return?

I have posed these questions not to answer them but to show how the various doubts contained in them are inevitably raised by the mashal's narrative. These doubts point in the direction of a critique of the king's behavior and of the justice of his actions—which is to say, toward a critical interrogation of God and His treatment of Israel. This critique, though never quite explicit in the mashal, undercuts the innocent optimism of our earlier "ritorical" reading of the composition as a praise parable and leads to a second reading of the mashal, one closer to complaint than to consolation.
This second reading is connected to another anomalous moment in the text, a small but significant discrepancy between the mashal and the nimshal at a point where their carefully drawn parallels diverge. The mashal's narrative, it will be recalled, is related entirely in the past tense: the king journeyed, he returned, he and his wife were happily reunited. At the point in the nimshal corresponding to the king's return, however, there is a sudden and unanticipated leap into the future that is signaled by one word, be. In the future, we are told, when the redemption comes, the Holy One, blessed be He, says to Israel, and so on. For the mashal's audience, this discontinuity can lead only to a single conclusion: Genuine consolation, the true fulfillment of the promises in Scripture, will come only at the time of redemption, at the end of history. The return of the king in the mashal's narrative was made possible only because fictional narrative, by convention, is narrated in the past tense. But in the realm of historical reality, and as long as that reality—human history—exists, redemption will always be in the future. Until it comes to pass, substitutes alone exist for authentic redemption. Among these substitutes, the foremost, of course, is the study of Torah, midrash. Yet even the study of Torah is not true redemption. It is only a surrogate, a palliative, a Band-Aid covering the wound of history.

In its totality, then, this mashal suggests two very different attitudes or meanings, taken together, they produce a message that is necessarily ambiguous, at least on the interpretive level. To students of literature, the hermeneutical dilemma posed by this ambiguity may recall other famous cases of literary ambiguity—Henry James's Turn of the Screw, for example. And, as in James's novella, the "solution" to the hermeneutical conundrum lies not in deciding on a univocal reading—either the explicit consolatory reading or the implied critique—but in reading both messages simultaneously despite the apparent contradiction between them.

The source of that contradiction and its consequent ambiguity can be explored further. For one thing, its real origins may lie not in the king's behavior but in the consort's. For why, after all, does she refuse to question her husband's acts, his loyalty, his faithfulness? Does her insistence upon praising the ketubah really indicate a view of the truth about her husband's cruelty? Is she perhaps constitutionally incapable of seeing how he has mistreated her? Or does she know something that we, the audience of the mashal, do not?

Again, these are questions that the mashal does not answer, though not, I believe, because they are strategically placed in the narrative to intentionally undercut its accepted meaning or its overt message of praise (as with the set of questions raised above). Rather, these questions actually lie beyond the mashal's own ken, the limits of its own comprehension. They are situated precisely at the farthest end of what we might call the mashal's theological horizon, indeed, they determine its horizon. To appreciate the mashal, its audience must take the consort's faithfulness to the king, like Israel's faithfulness to God, on faith; one cannot question the sincerity of either person's claim. To be sure, the other ambiguity in the parable—the conflict between complaint and consolation—persists, and if one were to search for its ultimate cause, it might be located in the mashal's author's own mind, in the unresolved nature of his feelings toward God, which may be ambiguous or contradictory. We will return to the question of the Rabbinic-midrashic conception of God in the final chapter. The ambiguity in the consort's mind will not help us to understand the mashal or its author's mind except to fix the one matter, the one question, that he or she would have found literally unthinkable. Indeed, rather than try to dissolve the mashal's inner contradiction or search for a psychological or spiritual explanation, one does better to ask: How can the literary form of the mashal simultaneously communicate two messages so different and yet related to each other? To answer this question, we must turn to the poetics of narrative in the mashal and to its formal features.

The first of these features is its stereotyped, virtually formulaic character. As I have shown elsewhere, nearly every motif in the mashal—its narrative units and themes as well as the diction and phraseology in which those narrative motifs and themes are expressed—is highly conventional. Partly because of this conventional, stereotyped character, narrative representation in the mashal tends toward absolute brevity. In fact, the parabolic narrative is often so concise it is like a skeleton or a sketch rather than a fully fleshed-out tale. Because all but the most necessary details are excluded, everything that is said draws the most intense attention. In this conciseness, the mashal's narrative resembles that of the Bible, in which, in Erich Auerbach's famous description, virtually nothing is foregrounded while the entire background is fraught with meaning. Indeed, this point of resemblance may be one of the stronger lines of continuity between the biblical and the Rabbinic literary traditions.

Another characteristic feature of the mashal's narrative poetics is its use of silences, lacunae, omissions, and other such points of discontinuity. Narratologists call these intentionally withheld pieces of narrative information gaps, and each and every one of them can be described systematically. For example, each of the questions raised earlier about Eikhah Rabbah 3:21 relates to a specific type of gap found not only in the mashal but in narrative generally: the missing links in the story; absent causes or motives; failure to offer satisfactory explanations for an occurrence in the plot; contradictions (like the discrepancy we noted between the mashal and its nimshal); and, most prominently of all, the discrepancy between its description of God's behavior (as represented in the figure of the king) and our normative conceptions of what God's behavior should be, a gap between expectation and reality.

Reading the gaps in the narrative and filling them in by interpreting their significance are the primary hermeneutical activities in which the mashal's audience engages. Indeed, one of the important reasons for the mashal's effectiveness as a
narrative form lies in its mastery of the art of gap-creating and gap-filling. In this way, the mashal guides its reader in the right direction, toward filling its gaps and grasping its underlying message. And given the centrality of gaps in the poetics of the mashal, it is not surprising that the activities of reading and interpretation should be diagrammatically reflected within the mashal itself. Such imagery is perhaps the other most striking feature of the mashal's narrative poetics.

Recent literary theory has familiarized us with the various roles that the reader plays in determining textual meaning. It has also described the different guises through which the figure of the reader can be represented in the fictional structure: the "implied reader," the "narratee," the "interpretant," and the "interpreting character," a figure who (according to one theoretician) is usually "coextensive with the first-person narrator or the main protagonist of the fiction" and through whom "the author is trying to tell the interpreter [the reader] something about interpretation."38

In the mashal, these various constructions coalesce into a figure I call the implied interpreter, an idealized character in the mashal's narrative who serves as a model for the real interpreter/reader and who guides the latter in the act of reading and interpreting the mashal's meaning. The implied interpreter is not identical with his or her counterpart in real life. To paraphrase Wolfgang Iser on the implied reader, the implied interpreter is a figure in the text 39 The real addressee will always possess certain interpretive resources that he or she will bring to understanding the mashal: knowledge of models of coherence (rules of chronology, causality, etc.), of literary conventions (including the stereotyped character of the mashal's diction, motifs, and themes), of the hermeneutical conventions of midrash (for example kal echomer, natsarikon, gematriyab).40 But the implied reader is in most ways an ideal interpreter who possesses all the literary competence needed to understand a mashal.41 As a fictional character, the implied interpreter literally inscribes the relationship of exegesis and narrative in the mashal by joining in his or her single persona, the attributes of both fictionality and interpretation.

To illustrate the implied interpreter's role, we can turn to the mashalim we have already analyzed. In the parable from Vayikra Rabbah about the elder and his robe, the implied interpreter is less an explicit character than a presence to be inferred from an implied interpretive event, or scene of interpretation, in the narrative. This scene is sometimes represented in the form of a recognizable hermeneutical operation, like the kal echomer, or through another kind of identifiable interpretive gesture. At other times, an actual scene is created and represented, as in the mashal about the elder. In this case, the elder himself creates a scene of interpretation by commanding his disciple to do something the disciple finds sufficiently extraordinary as to demand an explanation, then the elder himself becomes the implied interpreter with the disciple as his foil, an interpreter's straight man.

In contrast, in Eikhah Rabbah 3.21, the implied interpreter is explicitly represented through the character of the helpless, beleaguered consort who consoles herself by reading the promises her absent husband has left her in the ketubah. This act of reading the ketubah, along with the consort's later explanation (to the king) of its positive effect upon her, is about as complete a representation of the implied interpretive event as can be found in any mashal. Indeed, in this example, the representation of the implied interpreter may exceed the significance of the interpretation itself. After all, Rabbi Abba bar Kahana could have offered his midrash on the word zot as meaning Torah without using a mashal: he could have presented it as a definition of the demonstrative simply on the basis of Deut. 4:44 (vezot hatorah). What the mashal's narrative really contributes is not so much the excesses of zot, and not even a dramatization of the fulfillment of the eschatological promises of Leviticus, but a vivid and moving portrayal of the conditions of despair in which the poor abandoned wife finds herself. For it is within these conditions that the necessity for the eschatological-consolatory interpretation is born. In presenting this picture of despair and consolation, the mashal effectively portrays the history of its own genesis—a narrative of interpretation.

This narrative is not the only narrative of interpretation to be found in midrash, or even in the mashal itself. But it does sketch the basic lineaments of the story. The narrative invariably begins with a crisis, often marked (as here) by a departure or absence, either literal or figurative. The crisis involves the disappearance not of meaning but of presence (of the kings, God's), and it is followed by the characters' growing consciousness of the void, the emptiness and irresolution, in which they have been left. If the mashal's narrative can be said to reach a conclusion, the resolution comes through an interpretive event—not one that aims to discover meaning in the text, but one that aims to restore the absent presence, the guarantor of meaning. Its real aim is the restoration of a feeling of intimacy and affinity with the estranged text, and thereby with God. In this narrative, exegesis approaches the radical meaning of interpretation as "a presence between," that is, a literal mediator or mediating activity. The act of interpretation becomes primary a medium for exchange while the interpreter functions above all as a translator, literally one who carries the text across a divide, who negotiates the distance between Scripture and its felt presence in the reader's life. As Eikhah Rabbah 3.21 suggests, interpretation itself may not be the promised end, but it is the invaluable preparation that leads to such an end.

As we saw in the previous chapter, it is difficult to specify the precise hermeneutical underpinnings of midrash. Rather than possessing a hermeneutics, a systematic base for interpretation, midrash may be said to have been impelled by a narrative of interpretation. Accordingly, the goal of a theoretical study of midrash would be less a matter of hermeneutics, of learning the system of interpretive procedures, than a project of constructing a narratology.

The narrative of interpretation points to the essential impulse behind the midrashic mashal: the desire to represent in and through narrative the special kind of interpretation that midrash constitutes. Indeed, it is the poetics of that
metanarrative that a narratology of the mashal ultimately serves. For understanding this poetics, the formal character of narrative in the mashal, particularly its highly stereotyped nature, is extremely important. For it is precisely in its formulaic, conventionalized character—its outer shape, in other words—that midrashic exegesis discovers its ground of stability, not in an internalized, systematized hermeneutics. Like Rabbinic Judaism itself, the mashal is highly organized without and yet is very free, or at least relatively unregulated, within. In the next chapter, we will consider another midrashic form, the homily, to see how its external character, its language, can deepen our understanding of the midrashic enterprise.

Chapter 3

Forms of Midrash II: Homily and the Language of Exegesis

If the parable is the most distinctive type of narrative in midrash, no mode of discourse is more typical of midrash than the homily, the language of the sermon, and no aspect of midrashic literature raises as many questions as the particular connection between the synagogue sermon and the various exegeses and sermonlike interpretations found in the various midrashic collections. What is the relationship between text and performance in these passages? Are the snippets of sermonlike material or longer homiletical passages found in the midrashic collections transcriptions of actual sermons once delivered in a synagogue or academy? Or are they the literary creations of a redactor, an editor, who wished to preserve for posterity the homiletical material he had in one way or another inherited and collected? Alternatively, is it possible that the collections are actually sourcebooks for preachers, professional manuals containing traditional material that preachers could borrow and work up into their own sermons, not books meant to be read by lay readers? Or are the anthologies really repositories or archives of sermons once delivered but now intended to be studied in the academy by scholars and their students? If so, the collections would have been intended for private readers—not just for a few professional preachers, though still not necessarily for a wider audience of lay readers. What, then, is the relationship between midrash and its audience?

It is not likely that these many questions have a single answer. Indeed, our answers may vary from one midrashic collection to the next, or from one genre of midrash to another. In this chapter, I wish to broach these questions in relation to one major type of midrashic collection. As we shall see, this particular type raises important questions not only about the generic status of the collection itself—what sort of book it actually is—but also about genre within midrash. By this I mean the ways in which midrashic literary forms like the mashal are to be defined, and in particular the ways in which these literary forms create a literary language of their own, thereby achieving the kind of "literarness" I spoke of at the beginning of the last chapter.

The particular type of midrashic collection upon which I wish to concentrate is the homiletical midrash. In the classical period of midrash, this type is represented